



**COURAGE TO EXPLORE
THE JOB MARKET**

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COURAGE TO EXPLORE THE JOB MARKET

Agnieszka Brongiel¹

¹Author Affiliation, Poland, brongla@gmail.com

Abstract:

This module — “Courage to Explore the Job Market” — kicks off the HIRE-FIRE training series. It’s all about helping you to step confidently into today’s world of work.

Instead of seeing job hunting as something stressful or boring, this module encourages you to see it as an adventure — a mix of self-discovery, personal growth, and designing your own career path.

Here, you’ll find a balance of practical know-how and psychological tools that will help you understand not only how to look for a job, but also why certain choices feel right for you — and how to make them with confidence.

Keywords: Job market exploration; career development; assertiveness; personal values; financial security; forms of employment; mental resilience; organizational structures; SMART goals; fear of rejection

INTRODUCTION

Entering the job market is not only about employment, but also about finding out how you perform - how are your skills, values and expectations compared with real, hands – on experience. You may feel excited, or maybe you would rather feel pressure, or anxiety – it is all perfectly normal. This chapter does not contain a „recipe” for a perfect first job. It implies a switch of mindset when it comes to looking for a job – to start perceiving it as a process of creation, assessment, and mindful growth.

The knowledge collected in this chapter aims to build courage for the first step: starting with personal skills and values, through building realistic goals, with emotion and coping mechanisms at the finish. You will also find certain tools necessary to build mental resilience, practise assertive habits and work on personal mindset – because those are the key elements when it comes to performance in the world of job hunting, besides a great CV. It aims to overcome the intrusive thoughts and break through, to gain experience out of curiosity and will to learn instead of mindlessness. Because it is in practice when you find out the most about our own business path.

The job market is not uniform – it is a complex web of connections between industries, companies, jobs and skills. In the modern era, it morphs rapidly – automatization, digitalisation, remote work, and flexible working hours are only examples of new, ongoing trends. It means a greater choice of directions, but requires a better understanding of the topic from the youth.

Instead of focusing on acquiring the position that „matches my diploma”, focus on:

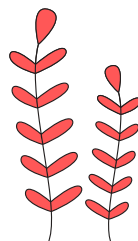
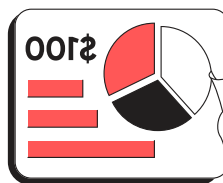


Skills already mastered or yet to be acquired

ex. data analysis, presentation skills, cross – culture communication



Personal motivations and values



Culture fitment
will I belong in that company?

A lot of young adults do not believe in their skills, but the best way to build confidence is to take action (even if it takes a small step forward).

An important step in strengthening the readiness to explore the job market may be:



Trying career counseling
e.g., at university or through the
Public Employment Agency



**Taking part in mentoring
programs**



Creating a portfolio

For those who do not have any work experience, it is worth looking through:

- seasonal jobs,
- student projects,
- freelance,
- social work.

All of those activities are a step in practising your professional skills and getting to know your personal preferences (not only where you like working, but also where you perform easily)

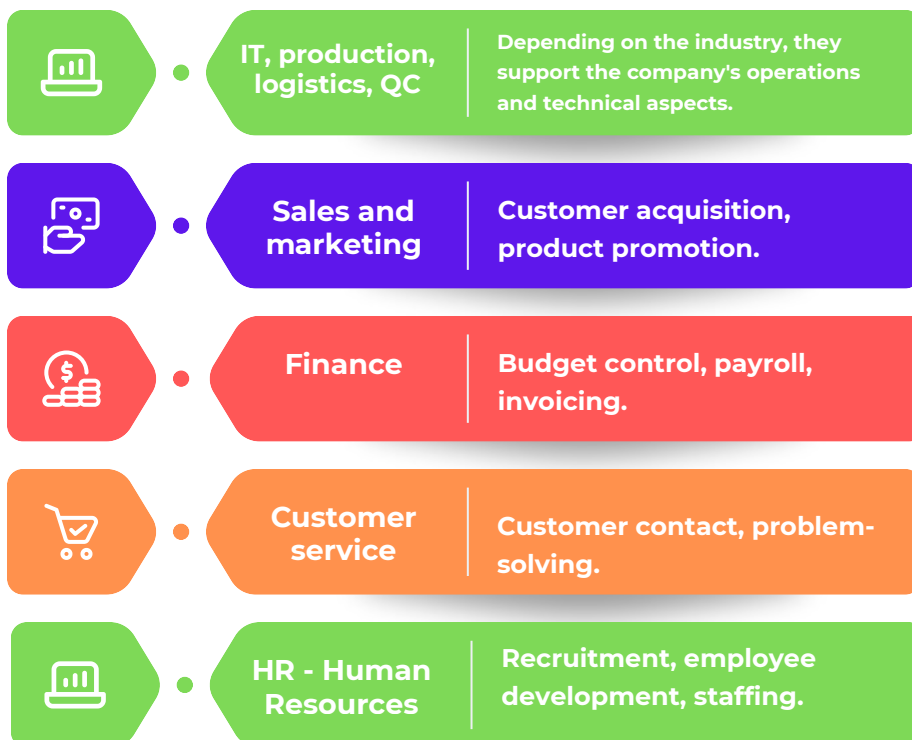
The job market rewards people who are proactive, aware and open for development – not necessarily perfect.

1 HOW DOES A COMPANY WORK? A LOOK INSIDE

1.1 Organisational Structure

Companies aren't just workplaces - they're complex entities that must deliver their product to the market, build a competitive advantage to make customers choose them over anyone else. Organizations live off making money, managing people and processes, and making strategic decisions. The better you understand how it all works, the easier it will be to find your role - even if you don't have professional experience yet.

Every company – large or small – has its own structure, which is a method of organizing workers and tasks. The most common ones are:



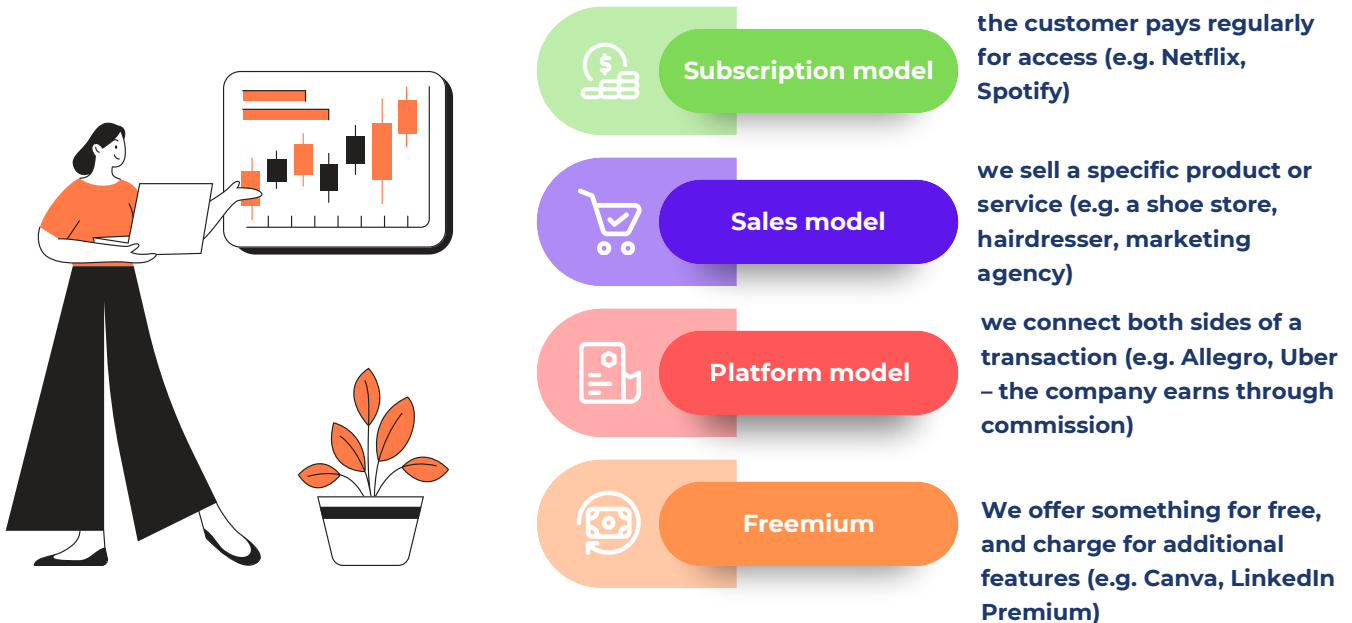
1.2 Business models – where does the company get its money from?

Companies have different management models – for example, the classic hierarchy (boss → manager → employee), but increasingly also so-called flat or matrix structures, where decision-making is decentralised, and teams work more autonomously.

Task: Talk to your friends or professionally experienced individuals and ask them to tell you how their organization works. What departments do they have, and who handles what? This quick exercise may show you a role in an organisation you weren't aware of. Write down your conclusions.

A business model is simply the answer to the question: “How do we make money?”

Here are some simple examples:



A better understanding how a company generates revenue also helps you see what really matters within it – what drives its operations and where there might be opportunities (or risks). Seeing things from this perspective can help you find a workplace that feels like the right fit for you.

Profit vs Revenue – do not confuse those terms



Revenue

is all the money that flows into a company from customers

Costs

expenses incurred by the company (e.g. salaries, premises and advertisement)

Profit

is what remains after subtracting costs from revenue.

Example: A company earned 100,000\$ but 85,000\$ were spent on expenses. Therefore, the profit was 15,000\$.

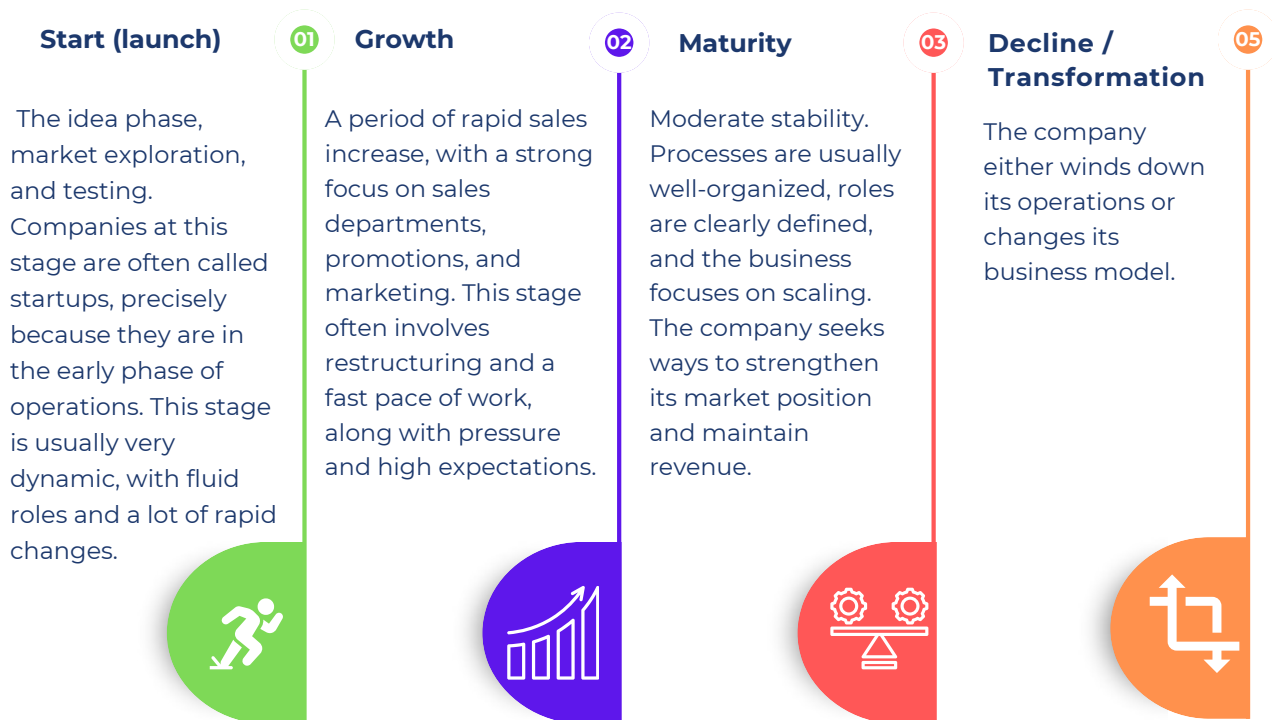
It's worth knowing that even a "large company" can struggle if profit is too low or unstable. This is why analytical, controlling, and strategic roles are so important – they help predict and plan. Every company usually cares about retaining and delivering value to customers over the long term.

It's also worth investigating the results achieved by the organization you want to work for, and how stable its revenue and profit are. Financial reports are available online.

1.3 Lifecycle of a company

Companies – just like people – go through different stages of development and operation

Company's lifecycle



Understanding this cycle helps to explain, why some companies undergo frequent changes. It's not always a sign of trouble. Sometimes, it's simply a natural part of the lifecycle stage.

More and more companies are using the Canvas Business Model – a tool that shows on a single sheet of paper what a company offers, who its customers are, how it sells, and what its costs and profits are. You can try filling out such a model for yourself as a 'product' on the job market!



1.4 WHERE DO YOU FIT IN

CORPORATION, SME, Startup, NGO, GOVERNMENT INSTITUTION, OR UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

Understanding the **lifecycle of a company** is just as important as understanding **different types of companies** – it helps you find a work environment that matches your style, values, and expectations. Here's a breakdown of the three main models:

Corporation (large organization)

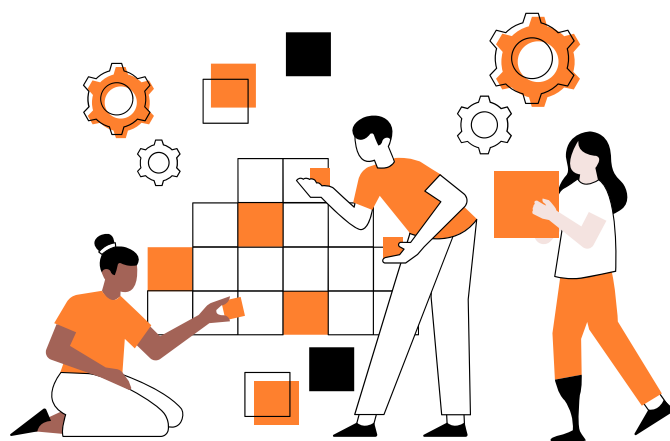
- Usually operates nationally or globally and employs hundreds or thousands of people.
- Has a clear structure, often based on hierarchy and clearly defined responsibilities.
- Focuses heavily on procedures, rules, reporting, and management systems (e.g., KPIs, OKRs).
- Career paths tend to be predictable – there are development programs and specific skills required for each position.

Pros: job stability, benefits (e.g., private healthcare, gym membership), clear roles and expectations, specialization.

Cons: limited influence on decisions, possible anonymity, and more bureaucracy.

SME (Small and Medium-sized Enterprise)

- Employs between 50 and 250 people.
- Often operates locally or within one specific industry.
- Flatter structure and closer relationships – it's easier to talk directly to the owner or director.
- Employees usually have a broader range of responsibilities.



Pros: flexibility, faster learning, and your work is more visible.

Cons: fewer formal career paths, potentially less stable (especially if tied to the local market).

Startup:

- Usually, a young company is building an innovative product or service.
- Fast-paced environment, frequent changes, and high uncertainty.
- Key traits: flexibility, ability to work in uncertainty, willingness to learn.
- The structure is flexible– one day you might be recruiting, the next you're running a marketing campaign

Pros: strong impact on the company's direction, creativity, and fast personal growth.

Cons: pressure to deliver results, financial instability, lack of clear procedures and roles.

NGO (Non-Governmental Organization)

- Usually mission-driven, focused on social, environmental, or educational goals rather than profit.
- Funding often comes from grants, donations, or international projects, which can influence job stability.
- The structure is generally flat, with a strong emphasis on collaboration, participation, and shared responsibility.
- Employees often wear multiple hats, combining project management, communication, and community engagement.

Pros: meaningful work, opportunity to make social impact, inclusive and value-driven culture.

Cons: limited funding, lower salaries compared to the private sector, and project-based contracts.



Government Institutions

- Operate within public administration and focus on delivering services, implementing policies, or managing regulations.
- Strong emphasis on procedures, compliance, and formal communication.
- Career paths are structured and often based on seniority or civil service frameworks.
- The work environment tends to be stable but slower in adapting to change.

Pros: job security, defined career progression, benefits (e.g., pension schemes, long-term contracts).

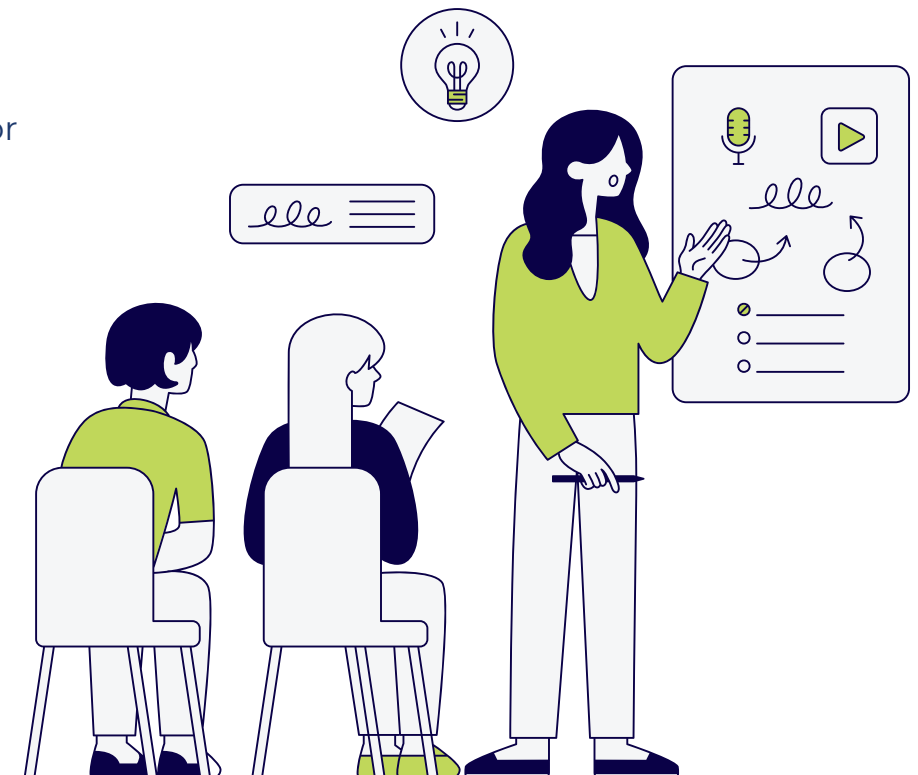
Cons: bureaucratic systems, limited innovation space, and slower decision-making.

University Campuses

- Combine elements of research, education, and administration.
- Offer diverse roles – from teaching and academic research to HR, communication, or project coordination.
- Work culture is knowledge-oriented, emphasizing independence, collaboration, and intellectual contribution.
- Career development often depends on academic achievements or project involvement.

Pros: stimulating intellectual environment, access to learning resources, flexible schedules.

Cons: competitive research funding, slow promotion processes, and temporary or grant-based positions.





At the end of 2024, Poland's Central Statistical Office (GUS) reported:

- 2,788,814 active non-financial businesses – a 3.7% increase compared to Q4 of 2023.
- Microenterprises (up to 9 employees) made up 95.7% of all businesses.
- Based on long-term trends, SMEs (micro, small, and medium enterprises) continue to make up around 99% of all businesses in Poland.

This means that, as of late 2024, microbusinesses dominate the market, and SMEs still represent almost all businesses in the country.

How to Find Your Fit?

A good way to discover your preferences might be:

- Trying different work environments (e.g. internships, volunteering, side projects);
- Weighing the pros and cons of each option for yourself.
- Talking to people working in various types of organizations.

Remember: Choosing where you want to work isn't a lifelong decision – it's about knowing what works best for you right now.

2 FINANCIAL SECURITY – WHERE TO BEGIN?

Financial security isn't just about "having a salary". It's about knowing how to manage your money – tracking income and expenses and setting aside part of it for unexpected situations. It's a foundation that enables you to make bold career decisions – like changing jobs or starting your own business.

2.1 Forms of employment and financial stability

Choosing a form of employment is more than just asking, "full-time or freelance?" Each type of contract comes with different rights, obligations, levels of independence, and responsibilities. Understanding these differences helps you choose what best fits your working style, life needs, and financial goals.

Employment Contract – the classic full-time job

Characteristics:

- The most regulated form of work
- Can be full-time or part-time

Benefits:

- Social security and health insurance are paid by your employer.
- You are entitled to paid leave based on your tenure, sick leave, pregnancy protection, and parental leave.
- Defined working hours and clear notice periods.
- A specific role in the organisation, with a job description, responsibilities, and expectations.

Limitations:

- Often less flexibility when it comes to working hours.
- Need approval from your supervisor for leave.

Best for:

- People who value security, regularity, and social benefits.

B2B – a Sole Proprietorship

This means a type of cooperation where you are not formally employed but work as an independent contractor — one business providing services to another. For example, a graphic designer running their own business who provides services for a company under a contract. You issue invoices instead of receiving a salary, and you are responsible for your own taxes and insurance.

Sole Proprietorship

A simple form of running a business where one person owns and manages everything. You make your own decisions, take responsibility for results, and keep all profits (after taxes).

It's common among freelancers, consultants, and contractors. It gives flexibility and independence — but also means taking care of paperwork, clients, and financial security on your own.

Characteristics:

- You work as a business, issuing invoices for your services.
- You are a business partner, not an employee.

Benefits:

- Higher net income.
- Ability to work with multiple clients.
- Greater flexibility if your contract focuses on results rather than hours.

Limitations:

- You pay your own social security, taxes, and health insurance.
- No sick leave unless you purchase private insurance.
- Accounting responsibilities (can be outsourced to an agency).

Best for:

- Independent people who value flexibility and are ready to take responsibility for building their own capital and business.

Contract of Mandate

Characteristics:

- A civil law contract – not governed by the Labor Code.
- No set working hours – it's result-based.

Benefits:

- Flexibility – often used for part-time or seasonal jobs.
- Good for earning extra income as a side hustle.

Limitations:

- No paid sick leave unless you get additional insurance.
- It can be terminated easily by the client.
- Often lacks long-term prospects.

Best for:

- Students or those looking for flexible, supplementary work.

Contract for specific work

Characteristics:

- A contract for delivering a specific „work“ done (e.g. a report, illustration, design).
- The result is what matters, not the time spent.

Benefits:

- Simple billing – often, social security contributions are not required.
- Financially attractive for creators.

Limitations:

- No health or social insurance.
- No job security.

Best for:

- Freelancers, artists, designers, copywriters, programmers, etc.

Each form of employment comes with its own opportunities and risks. It's worth considering what matters most to you now and deciding based on that. Many people starting their careers prefer employment contracts because they feel more connected to their employer and can gain experience within a more structured environment.

2.2 Personal budget - the foundation of every decision

Your budget is a map of your financial situation. It includes:

- **Income** (e.g., salary, freelance work, scholarship),
- **Fixed expenses** (rent, bills, food),
- **Variable expenses** (entertainment, dining out, shopping),
- **Savings/investments** (emergency fund, savings account).

Knowing your numbers in each of these areas gives you a clear picture of what you can afford, change, and whether you rely on others (like family) or stay independent instead.



According to a 2023 NBP (National Bank of Poland) survey, only 42% of young Poles plan their budget, and 1 in 5 have no savings at all.

2.3 What is a financial safety threshold?

This is the amount that gives you psychological comfort and a sense of stability in case of unexpected situations. It varies for everyone – depending on your lifestyle, household size, or financial obligations – but generally means:

- Covering 3–6 months of living costs (fixed + essential variable expenses),
- Having funds for emergencies: medical care, equipment breakdowns, sudden relocation, or job changes.

How to calculate your financial threshold:

1. Add up all your monthly living costs (rent, bills, food, transport, medication, and debts).
2. Multiply by 3–6, depending on how secure your job feels and your mental comfort level.
3. Start with a 3-month goal and build up to 6 months over time.

Having this financial cushion allows you to, for example, leave a job that no longer serves you – without the fear of not surviving financially.



Pro tip: Keep these funds in a separate savings account, preferably one that's not easily accessible (no debit card or app access).

Tools and Habits for Managing Money

Budgeting apps

Money Manager, Moje Finance, Spendee, YNAB. They help you monitor your daily expenses, spot emotional or inefficient spending habits, and improve financial control.

Automatic savings transfers

Set up a transfer on payday, e.g., 10% to a savings account – you won't feel it as much, and consistency pays off.



The 50/30/20 method

- 50% of income – needs (housing, food, bills),
- 30% – wants and leisure (vacations, hobbies),
- 20% – savings and debt repayment.

Monthly financial review

At least once a month: review your spending → identify unnecessary costs → make decisions for the next month.

What Is a Freedom Fund?

This is money that gives you space to make important decisions without financial pressure.

It's different from a safety cushion – it's not for survival but for growth, change, and empowered daily choices.

Examples of use:

- Attending a course or training,
- Hobbies or leisure activities,
- Other expenses that support your well-being and development.

You usually build this fund over time, as your income grows and your professional life becomes more stable.

Even if you have a full-time job, nothing guarantees it “forever.” That's why it's wise to:

- Diversify income sources: combine employment with freelance work, passive income, or side gigs.
- Invest in skill development: learn regularly, update your knowledge, and build a portfolio.
- Nurture your professional network and visibility: LinkedIn, industry events, recommendations, and online presence.

Instead of focusing solely on your paycheck:

- Build financial and professional flexibility.
- Be aware of your actual cost of living.
- Save regularly – even small amounts, consistently.
- Think long-term, plan, and stick to your plan – especially when things are going well.

3 MY COMPASS OF VALUES

Values are internal beliefs that guide our decisions, choices, and reactions. They are like a personal GPS - if we ignore them, it's easy to "get lost". For example, in a job that pays well but drains our energy, or in one that's full of exciting challenges and personal growth but lacks financial stability. Knowing your values helps you choose career paths aligned with them, even if they're unconventional or don't meet others' expectations. It also helps you negotiate your rates better by highlighting specific skills and achievements that build your value in the eyes of recruiters or employers.

3.1 What are the values and how to discover them?

Core values are the aspects of life that matter to you - not what's "cool" or "trendy," but what feels internally significant. Examples include:

- Personal growth
- Freedom and independence
- Stability
- Recognition
- Helping others
- Creativity
- Belonging and relationships

Values are not "good" or "bad" - they differ from person to person and can change over time. What you valued in high school might not match what you need as a young adult.

Sometimes values come into conflict - like "freedom" vs. "security" or "relationships" vs. "ambition". That is perfectly normal. The key is to recognize those moments and make conscious decisions. You won't always be able to satisfy everything at once, but you can set priorities depending on your life stage.

- Knowing your values isn't just a "coaching cliché" - it's a **practical tool** for making authentic life and career decisions.
- It's helpful to **review your values every few years** - we grow, mature, and collect new experiences.
- Being able to **communicate your values** (e.g., during a job interview) is a strength - it shows self-awareness, alignment, and ownership of your development and well-being.

Why is it worth knowing your values?

- They help you avoid paths that seem attractive but feel inauthentic (e.g., a “prestigious” company that violates your needs).
- They support decision-making in times of uncertainty - like whether to accept a job offer, change your field of study, or move abroad.
- They protect against burnout - when you work against your values, your energy quickly drains.



Research by Gallup Institute shows that people who consciously live their values at work report 2.5 times greater sense of meaning and life satisfaction. This is a key factor in reaching long-term goals.

How to discover your values?

- Think back to moments when your actions felt meaningful and energizing. What made them special?
- Ask yourself: “What motivates me to act, even when it’s hard?”
- Look through a list of values (30–50 words), pick 10 → then 5 → then your top 3.
- Write them down and reflect daily on how they’re being lived out in your actions and decisions.

Example:

Ola chooses growth, freedom, and honesty.

She was offered a high-paying job but with a rigid schedule and unclear rules. She declined - knowing it would go against her values. She wanted clarity about her responsibilities, so when preparing for the next job interview, she researched the company and the industry as a whole to create a list of questions about the potential role.

3.2 Values and goals

Life and career goals show you direction and help you make conscious decisions. They define what you aim for - in your personal life (e.g., health, relationships, lifestyle) and at work (e.g., growth, stability, impact, prestige). Clear goals help you plan your future, set priorities, and avoid random, mindless choices. Awareness of your goals is the first step toward a life and career aligned with your values.

Values don’t change every day—they often evolve or shift in importance. What changes more often are the **goals** and the **ways of achieving them**.

- **Value: Helping others**

→ **Short-term goal:** Become a mentor in a social program.

→ **Long-term goal:** Start a foundation or become a therapist.

Writing your goals using the **SMART framework** helps make them specific, measurable, and achievable in a set timeframe. Instead of vague resolutions like “I want a better job,” you get a clear action plan like:

“By the end of September, I will find a job related to my field of study with a salary of at least 3000 EUR.”

SMART rule keeps you focused on what’s realistic, which boosts motivation and helps track progress.

Examples of long-term career goals (approx. 2 years):

- “Within two years, I will secure a full-time job in IT as a junior developer and earn at least 3800 EUR.”
- “By the end of 2026, I will start a photography business and regularly complete projects for clients.”
- “In the next two years, I will complete my master’s degree and gain work experience that will allow me to apply for specialist positions in my chosen field.”

Examples of short-term career goals:

- “By the end of summer, I will complete at least one internship in marketing.”
- “Within three months, I will build a professional LinkedIn profile and connect with 30 people from my industry.”
- “For the next six months, I will learn Excel and earn a certificate confirming my skills.”
- “I’ll start freelancing and land at least two clients by the end of the quarter.”

Build your career goal based on values:

SMART method	Guiding Questions	Your Goal / Notes
S	Specific What exactly do I want to achieve?	
M	Measurable How will I know I achieved it? What are the metrics?	
A	Achievable Is this goal realistic at this moment? What resources do I have?	
R	Relevant Why is this goal important to me? How does it align with my plans?	
T	Time-bound When will I complete it? What's the deadline? What milestones will I reach?	

When writing your goals, ask yourself:

“Is this aligned with my values, or am I doing it to impress others?”

If you feel no satisfaction or sense of purpose, revisit your goal list and seek a more authentic intention. Being aware of your values helps build confidence in reaching your goals and say “no” early to paths that only meet others’ expectations.

4 ASSERTIVENESS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCE

We enter adulthood with the hope of finally making our own choices. Yet often, it feels like someone else is steering our lives: parents, teachers, friends, media. Sometimes they act out of care, sometimes from a need for control, and we get lost between “what’s appropriate” and “what I really want.”

4.1 What exactly is assertiveness?

Assertiveness is a skill that helps you return to yourself and make choices that feel right for you - even when it’s difficult.

Assertiveness is a way of communicating and making decisions where you express your thoughts, needs, and emotions respectfully - to yourself and others. You don’t yell, sulk, or pretend everything’s fine. You speak clearly, calmly, and honestly.

Important: Assertiveness is **situational**. It might be easy to say “no” to friends but hard with your parents - or vice versa. Maybe you're confident at work but withdraw in personal relationships. That’s normal. Assertiveness can be learned step by step, in different contexts.

Assertiveness is **honesty without harm**. It allows you to build healthy relationships, protect your boundaries, and express yourself - even in difficult situations.

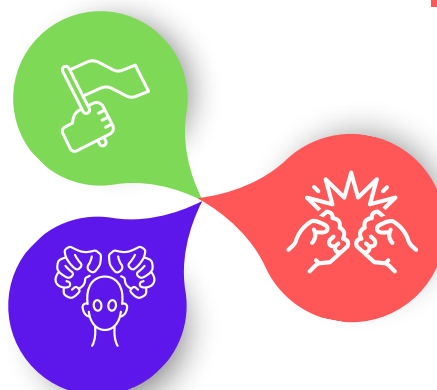
Assertiveness is the middle ground between:

Submission

agreeing to something against your will to avoid conflict (“I’ll do it, or they’ll be mad”).

Manipulation

acting indirectly, using guilt or emotional blackmail (“If you would’ve loved me, you’d do it for me”).



Aggression

using verbal or emotional violence, often masked as anger or sarcasm (“That’s a stupid idea, stop talking nonsense”).

4.2 Emotions – The compass of assertiveness

Emotions are natural reactions of your body and mind to what's happening inside or around you. They are important signals—they show what matters to you, what brings joy, and what crosses your boundaries. There are no “good” or “bad” emotions. All are important because they carry messages.

- **Anger** – might mean: “someone crossed my boundaries.”
- **Sadness** – “I lost something important.”
- **Fear** – “I need safety.”
- **Joy** – “This is good for me.”

Understanding your emotions is the first step toward assertiveness. They let you know when something feels off, when you're happy, or when it's time for change. Pause and name what you feel—it really helps to talk to others without exploding or withdrawing.

Exercise: 3 Steps to understanding your emotions

1. Pause and ask yourself: “What am I feeling right now?”
2. Choose one emotion: anger, sadness, joy, fear, surprise, shame.
3. Name the situation that triggered the feeling:
4. “I feel ___ because...”
5. Ask yourself: “What is this emotion trying to tell me? What do I need right now?”
6. E.g., “I feel angry because someone crossed my boundaries. I need to assert them more clearly.”

4.3 Assertiveness in practice

“I”-statements – how to talk about yourself without attacking others

We're often taught to speak using “we” statements or generalizations. An “I”-statement is a way of expressing yourself by talking about your own emotions, experiences, and needs in relation to a specific situation - without blaming, judging, or attacking the other person.

It's based on the principle: “I talk about myself, not about you,” which helps maintain respect in conversation and increases the chances of being understood.

The structure usually includes three elements:
what I feel, when it happens, and what I need or expect.

Instead of:

“You always criticize me!”

Try:

“I feel discouraged when you say it's pointless. I need some support to give it a try.”

Structure of an “I”-statement:

1. I feel... (name the emotion),
2. When... (describe a specific situation, not a judgment),
3. I need / I ask you to... (your need or request).

It's a way of speaking about yourself without judging the other person or their actions, while still clearly expressing your needs and requests.

In social relationships:

- “I enjoy being with you, but today I need some time alone.”
- “I don't want to comment on that – it's too personal for me.”

In family settings:

- “I understand you're concerned, but I want to make this decision on my own.”
- “Thanks for the advice, but I need space to find my own path.”

At work or university:

- “I can't take on another project right now - I'm already swamped.”
- “I prefer to know the details in advance before making a decision.”

Making requests – why it matters

Many people are afraid to ask for things because they don't want to seem weak or like a burden. However, making a clear request is not a weakness – it shows that you know what you need and can take care of yourself. A request doesn't mean the other person must agree – but it gives them the chance to respond consciously and with empathy.

Don't expect others to read your mind – speak up.

A well-formulated request is:

- **Specific** (it's clear what you want),
- **Positive** (you say what you do want, not just what you don't),
- **Non-pressuring** (leaves room for the other person to say no),
- It's helpful to include the word “**please**” – it signals respect and gives the other person space to think, while showing that your request matters to you.

“Can you please walk me to the station today?”

“I need your opinion - could you please take a look at my project?”

“It’ll be easier for me if you let me know in advance - could you please do that?”

Appreciating others – a small gesture, a big impact

Showing gratitude and recognizing others’ efforts builds trust, motivation, and closeness. People are more likely to support those who make them feel valued and appreciated. Don’t wait for big occasions—appreciate the little things daily.

“Thanks for listening to me today – it really helped.”

“You did an awesome job with that—I can see how much effort you put in.”

“I’m glad I can count on you.”

Remember: A request is a sign of maturity, and appreciation is a sign of respect. Both skills help build healthy relationships—at home, at work, and anywhere people connect.

Saying “No” – how to refuse without feeling guilty

Often, saying “no” is one of the hardest forms of assertiveness, but it is very necessary. An assertive refusal is a way of saying “no” clearly, calmly, and politely - without attacking the other person and while presenting your position. It involves expressing your decision directly, respecting both your own boundaries and those of the other person. It does not require explanations or justifications - you just need to refuse firmly and kindly. Through this, we teach others where our limits are and build relationships based on mutual respect.

It is good to remember that assertiveness is not only about defending your own boundaries but also about caring for the relationships. When refusing assertively, we show respect both to ourselves and the other person.

Sometimes - if we have the possibility and will - it is worth proposing an alternative solution to show that we care about the connection, even if we cannot fulfil the current request. Such an approach helps to avoid misunderstandings, builds trust, and shows that we can communicate maturely. An assertive refusal with a proposal is a cooperation between “I don’t want to now” and “I want to maintain a relationship with you”. It’s a way to say “no” while simultaneously showing readiness to collaborate.

Remember: Only do this if you want to and are ready to.

Example of an assertive refusal:

“Thank you for thinking of me, but I can’t do this.”

“That date doesn’t work for me, so I won’t be coming.”

Example of an assertive refusal with an alternative:

“I can’t help you today, but I’m available tomorrow afternoon - does that work for you?”

“I won’t prepare your CV, but I can show you how to do it yourself.”

Tool: Broken Record Technique

The “broken record” technique is used when someone pressures you, tries to persuade you, or makes you feel guilty even though you have already expressed your position. It involves calmly, politely, and repeatedly returning to your decision - without getting into explanations or discussions. It works because it clearly shows your consistency and boundaries, which, over time, discourages the other person from further pressure.

It consists of repeating your message - without changing it, despite pressure from the other side:

“I understand this is important to you, but I say ‘no’ and this is my decision.”

“Yes, I know this matters, but I’m sticking to my decision.”

Mine or Theirs – Where do my thoughts and beliefs come from?

The Influence Map

At the beginning, we mentioned that assertiveness is a skill that helps you reconnect with yourself and make decisions in line with your true self—even if it’s difficult. Often, it’s difficult because in our minds we hear many voices. In the next chapter, you will find a more detailed description of the influence map, but right now we invite you to a short exercise to check who is suggesting things to you and trying to influence your decisions “inside your head.” Take a moment to reflect on whether this voice and its statements are still important and relevant to you.

This exercise helps you understand who and how influences your decisions.

How to do it:

1. Draw yourself in the centre of a sheet of paper.
2. Around yourself, write down people or groups who shape you: parents, friends, teachers, media, and authorities.
3. Next to each, write down:
 - What do they say? What do you hear or remember from their messages?
 - How do you feel about it?
 - Do you want to follow it?

This exercise provides great clarity: which voices support you and which limit you. Distinguishing what is truly yours from what others bring helps you become assertive. It's also worth remembering that some of these voices will remain relevant and useful—you should appreciate them and check again from time to time.

Remember:

- Assertiveness does not mean being without emotions - in fact, quite the opposite. Emotions help you determine what is important to you.
- You have the right to your own opinion, pace of development, and decisions even if someone disagrees with them.
- You can be assertive to varying degrees in different relationships. It's a process - not something judged as "good/bad," but rather "conscious/unconscious."
- Assertiveness is built through daily practice - from small situations to more challenging ones.



5 FEAR OF CHANGE AND REJECTION

Change – whether it’s a job, field of study, or place of residence – involves risk and uncertainty. That’s why fear is a natural reaction. It’s not a sign of weakness but an instinct protecting us from the unknown. The problem arises when this fear blocks growth instead of supporting reflection. Rejection, on the other hand, is one of the most difficult psychological experiences – often perceived as a threat to identity (“I am not good enough”). It’s worth learning to distinguish rejection of a decision (e.g., “we are not hiring you now”) from rejection of a person (which most often does not happen and starts out as fear or miscommunication).

5.1 Where does a fear of change come from?

Change always involves the unknown, taking a certain risk, and awareness that not everything may go according to plan – and the brain dislikes what it doesn’t know. Therefore, it naturally triggers fear. Here are the four most common sources of this fear:

- **Uncertainty** – “I don’t know what will happen – better to stay with what’s familiar.”

We feel safe when we know what to expect. Even if the current situation frustrates us (e.g., a job we don’t like), at least it’s familiar. Change means risk – and our brain prefers predictability over “something new,” even if that something could be better.

Example: “In my current job, I have no chance to develop, but I know what I’m doing. I’m afraid of a new job because I might not manage.”

- **Fear of failure** – “What if I don’t succeed and embarrass myself?”

Sometimes we fear not meeting expectations – ours or others’. We worry that we won’t cope, will make mistakes, or be judged. Negative scenarios arise in our minds, even though nothing has happened yet.

Example: “I wanted to apply for that position, but I thought I was probably not good enough.”

- **Social pressure** – “My parents will be disappointed, my friends won’t understand me.”

We don’t act in a vacuum – often our decisions are strongly tied to the opinions of those close to us. If we consider something different than the “typical path,” fear of judgment, misunderstanding, or conflict appears. Fear concerns not only the change but also how it will be perceived.

Example: “My parents think I should become a lawyer. But I dream of a creative job – and I’m afraid to tell them.”

- **Loss of control** – “I might not find my way in the new job; I don’t know what to do.”

We know our place in the current system – we know how to navigate, what the rules are. In a new environment, everything must be discovered anew. This can give a feeling of chaos and lack of influence – which increases stress.

Example: “I don’t know if I can handle such a dynamic company. In my old job, I had clearly defined tasks, but here everything changes every week.”

Psychological fact:

Research shows that the brain treats uncertainty as a greater threat than physical pain. This explains why people often stay in known but unhealthy environments – e.g., toxic jobs – instead of trying something new.

Exercise: “What is holding me back?” – recognizing fear of change

Goal: Become aware of what exactly causes your fear of change and what lies behind it.

Step 1: Choose one change you’re thinking about (e.g., changing job, moving, starting studies, ending a relationship). Write it briefly: “I want to, but I’m afraid...”

Step 2: Complete the sentence at least 5 times: “I’m afraid that...”

Example:

- I’m afraid I won’t manage.
- I’m afraid others will judge me.
- I’m afraid I’ll lose security.
- I’m afraid I’ll make a mistake.
- I’m afraid I’ll disappoint my loved ones.

Step 3: Next to each “I’m afraid that...” answer the following questions:

- Where does this fear come from?
- Is this a fact or just a thought?
- What would I do if I weren’t afraid of this?

Step 4: Write down one small thing you can do despite this fear.

5.2 What is rejection?

Rejection, lack of acceptance, is one of the most painful psychological experiences – and not without reason. Our brain perceives it just like physical pain. In ancient times, rejection by a group meant a threat to life – which is why today we react so strongly emotionally. Often, we treat refusal this way, making it harder to keep trying. It's worth approaching refusal more consciously, so as not to treat it as a general rejection of ourselves but to understand the reasons. This can build calmness or motivate us to develop if we lack skills in the desired professional role.

Refusal of a job offer says nothing about your worth as a person

If someone did not hire you, did not respond to your CV, or chose another candidate, it doesn't mean you are "worse." It's often a matter of needs, budget, and team profile, instead of the "candidates evaluation". Sometimes we lack a certain skill, but that doesn't mean there's no place for us anywhere. It's worth finding out why you weren't hired to deepen your knowledge about the role or verify your assumptions.

Example: "They didn't hire me because they needed someone who speaks German – I have other strengths, and I understand their decision."

You can prepare for refusal – have plan B (and C)

It's not about expecting failure but knowing: "If I don't get this job, I have another option." This gives psychological safety and lets you act with more calmness.

Example: "If I don't get this job, I will volunteer at a foundation and improve my skills over the summer."

The biggest threat is not rejection or refusal, but avoiding action out of fear

Avoiding conversations, giving up on applying, giving up on dreams - all to avoid hearing "no." This is often a subconscious search for arguments to protect ourselves from refusal: "I'll wait, I have a trip planned, I'll write to that company later. It's worth redefining refusal and looking for lessons in every experience. Salespeople often say: Every "no" brings us closer to a better 'yes". Why? Because we learn more about our needs and the recruiter's needs, how to better show our skills, how to answer questions more precisely... This approach can help us increase our courage to apply more often for jobs we care about.

Example: "I was afraid to go to the interview because I thought I wasn't suitable. But I finally applied - and they didn't choose me, yet I got good feedback and more confidence for the next interviews."

5.3 How to cope? Tools and techniques

Fear of change or rejection will not disappear completely – but you can learn to live with it and act despite it. The key is not to wait for the moment when “we stop being afraid,” but to start using simple tools that help us act with more calmness and awareness.

Here are some proven methods:

Visualization of a positive scenario

Imagine step by step how the situation you fear unfolds – but with a good ending. The brain practices “dry run” as if it’s happening for real – so when the real moment comes, stress is lower. You can tell someone about the situation and explain how you will behave.

Example:

Before a salary negotiation, I imagine calmly presenting my arguments, clearly stating my needs, and the other side listens attentively. Saying this builds the scenario and plan. You will be prepared.

Risk scaling (exercise “worst-case scenario”)

Ask yourself:

- “What’s the worst that can happen?”
- “What are the real consequences?”
- “What can I do if it happens?”

Example:

I don’t get this job → I feel disappointed → I rest a day → I use feedback, improve CV, try elsewhere.

I don’t get this job → parents will be disappointed → but they love me and their sadness will soon pass → we take a break in contact → and I gain experience to do better at next interviews.

This exercise demystifies fear – suddenly the worst is not “the end of the world.”

Acceptance of emotions – emotion is not a verdict

“I feel fear, but that doesn’t mean I can’t act.” You don’t need to feel confident to take the first step. You can be stressed and still act. That’s very brave ;)

Example:

I admit to myself: “Yes, I’m afraid they will judge me – and despite that, I’m going to that interview.”

Contact with emotions is a very important skill, and naming the emotions you feel helps calm or use them for yourself.

The method of small steps

You don't have to quit studies, move, or change everything in one day. Act gradually – it reduces tension and builds confidence.

Step example:

1. Find a person in the industry and ask for a 15-minute talk.
2. Update your CV / LinkedIn profile.
3. Send one application to a company that interests you.
4. Arrange an interview – as a trial, not an exam.

Exercise:

Each of us has already experienced difficult changes - think about those moments: Changing schools? Exams? Moving? Breakup?

→ What helped you then? What skills, support, or mindset did you use?

Collecting such experiences strengthens the feeling: "If I managed then — I can now too." You can write down what boosted your confidence and agency back then and use it again now.

You can also return to the chapter about goals and motivation to find inspiration and energy for new changes.

5.4 Seeking support - you are not alone!

Social support is a network of relationships that help us cope with difficulties and enjoy life. Each of us — even if we don't always feel it — has people around who can support us: family, friends, teachers, acquaintances, and sometimes professionals. Using their presence is not a sign of weakness, but of strength and the ability to take care of yourself. With support, it's easier to make decisions, go through changes, and regain balance during tough times. Talking to someone you trust can:

- help reduce tension,
- organize your thoughts,
- offer a different perspective.

If you don't have such a person around, there are support groups, mentoring programs, student organizations, and even professional psychological help available.

Remember!

- Fear of change is a sign that you are entering a growth zone, and mistakes are a natural part of learning.
- Rejection does not define your worth — it's a part of life that you can experience and transform into a lesson.
- Instead of waiting for the perfect moment, practice courage in small situations — this builds long-term mental and professional resilience.

6 MENTAL RESILIENCE, CHANGES AND GROWTH

Mental resilience is the ability to cope with difficult situations, bounce back from failure, and adapt to change — without losing your sense of direction or self-worth. It doesn't mean “being emotionless” or “tough,” but rather being flexible and able to keep going despite stress.

In the context of professional life, mental resilience means being able to function despite:

- losing a job or being rejected,
- a motivation crisis,
- frustration due to uncertainty or overload, unexpected changes.

6.1 Growth mindset vs. fixed mindset (Carol Dweck)

Carol Dweck developed the concepts of the growth mindset and fixed mindset based on decades of research on motivation, self-esteem, and attitudes toward failure, starting in the 1970s. Her theory is grounded in psychological experiments, school and academic environment observations, and long-term studies on how our beliefs influence learning, motivation, and our ability to deal with setbacks.

As a result of her findings, Dweck defined two approaches that shape our development and performance:



Fixed Mindset – the belief that our abilities, intelligence, or talents are fixed traits that cannot significantly change. People with this mindset tend to avoid challenges, fear failure, and often give up quickly, believing that “you either have it, or you don’t.”

Growth Mindset – the belief that skills and intelligence can be developed through effort, learning, and practice. People with this mindset are more likely to take on challenges, learn from mistakes, and see difficulties as opportunities for growth.



Shifting from a **fixed mindset to a growth mindset** helps build **resilience, motivation, and readiness to act** — which is especially important at the start of your career path.

Examples of Beliefs and Reactions:

Someone with a fixed mindset might think: “I’m not good at math, so there’s no point in trying,” or “If I’m not succeeding, it means I’m not cut out for it.” They avoid challenges to prevent embarrassment or disappointing others, and they give up easily when things go wrong.

Someone with a growth mindset will respond differently: “I’m not good at this yet, but I can learn,” “This is hard, but interesting — I’ll try a different approach,” or “I made a mistake — what can I learn from it?”

This mindset makes it easier to take on new challenges and keep going despite setbacks.

Simple Exercises You Can Try

Exercise: Catch Your Thought and Rewrite It

Think of a situation where something recently didn’t go well, or where you backed out because you were afraid of failing. Write down the thought you had at the time.

Example: “I’m not cut out for public speaking.”

Now try to reframe that thought in a more supportive, growth-oriented way. For example: “Public speaking stresses me out, but I can learn it and practice step by step.”

This exercise helps you notice harmful thought patterns and consciously replace them.

Exercise: My Growth – The “Yet” Journal.

Take a piece of paper or start a note on your phone. Write down three things you can’t do yet or that frustrate you. Add the word “yet” to each one.

Examples:

- “I’m not good at managing money... yet.”
- “I don’t know what I want to do in life... yet.”

Then, write down one small step you can take to move toward that goal.

This simple but effective tool builds awareness that growth is a process — not a label.

Exercise: My Beliefs – Growth vs. Fixed Mindset

1. Choose an area that matters to you right now, for example:

- learning a new skill,
- work/career,
- relationships,
- dealing with failure.

2. Read the statements below and check the ones you agree with:
(multiple choice allowed)

Set A – Fixed Mindset:

"If I have to try really hard, it means I'm not good at it."

"Failures are proof that I should focus on something else."

"People have certain abilities, and there's not much you can do about it."

"Criticism makes me feel weak – I prefer to avoid it."

Set B – Growth Mindset:

"Effort is part of development – I learn through doing."

"Failures show me what I don't know yet – they're information, not a sentence."

"Skills can be developed through practice and learning."

"Constructive feedback helps me grow."

3. Reflect on the following:

- Which set did you check more statements from – A or B?
- Are there areas in your life where your approach is more growth-oriented and others where it's more fixed?
- What can you change to start viewing challenges as opportunities?



Research shows that people with a growth mindset are more likely to achieve long-term success, even if their starting point was "weaker."



Tip: A growth mindset isn't "magical thinking" – it's a choice to see challenges as opportunities to learn, rather than as a test of your worth. Even one shift in how you think can open a new path forward. Check out the chapter Fear of Change and Rejection – you'll find ways there to start taking action

6.2 Mental resilience - something you can build

We often think of resilience as a trait: “you either have it, or you don’t.” But really, resilience is a process of learning how to rise after difficult experiences and regain balance. It can be strengthened day by day.

One helpful method is collecting evidence of *survival* – recalling situations that were difficult for you but that you managed to get through. This builds strength and self-belief.

Resilience also grows in relationships – when we share emotions, seek support, and stay authentic. It’s not about being a lone hero, but about the strength that comes from connection.

And something very important: recovery is part of resilience. Sleep, rest, and relaxation aren’t rewards for working hard – they’re prerequisites for being able to act. Without rest, no mental strength can be.

Microlearning – Grow in Small Steps

Personal development doesn’t have to mean long training sessions and a huge time investment. Microlearning is about learning in short, frequent bursts – 5–15 minutes a day. It could be reading a short article, listening to a quick podcast episode, or doing an exercise from an online course.

Self-growth can also include practical things: building your professional profile, learning to use simple tools like Canva, Excel, Notion, or ChatGPT. These small skills pay off in both work and life.

You can also create personal development challenges – e.g., asking for feedback daily, learning a new word in a foreign language, or creating a portfolio over 30 days. This builds not only knowledge, but also self-confidence and flexibility.

Psychological flexibility – the key to acting despite difficult emotions

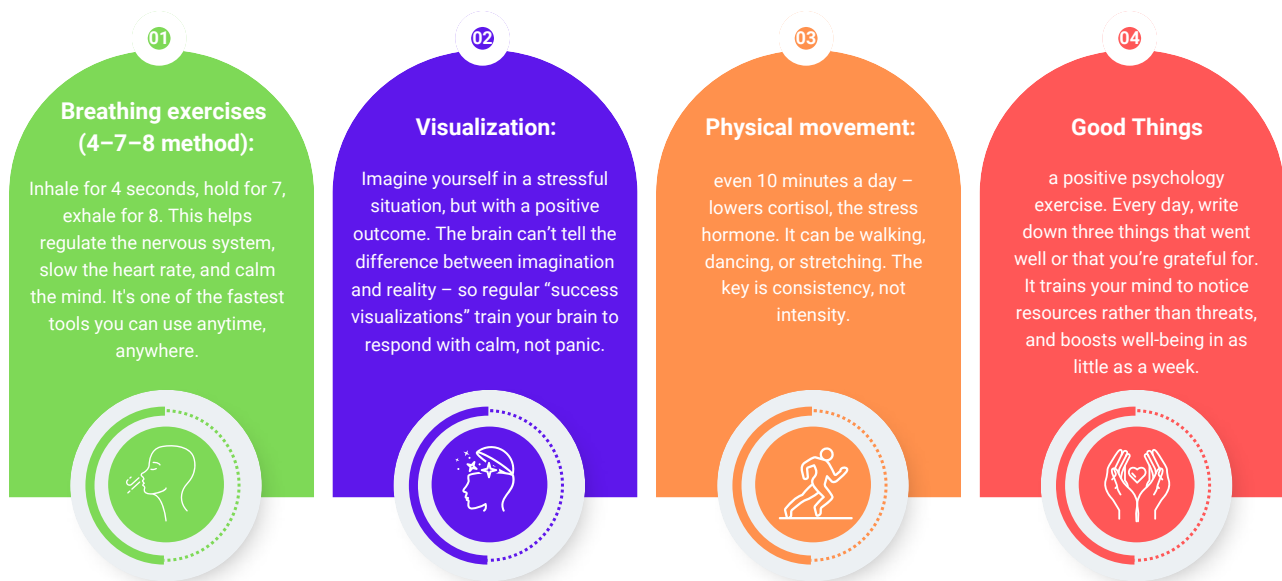
Psychological flexibility is the ability to stay connected to your values even when fear, uncertainty, or stress arise. It's not about eliminating emotions but about acting even when they're present.

Helpful questions to ask yourself:

- *What's important to me in this situation, even though I'm afraid?*
- *How can I take one small step, even if I don't feel ready?*

Sometimes, a single small action is enough to break the avoidance spiral and reconnect with yourself.

Useful Exercises in High-Stress Situations:



Summary

In today's fast-paced and often unpredictable world, stress, change, and uncertainty are part of everyday life. That's why mental resilience, flexible thinking, and courage to grow are no longer "extras" or "for a select few" – they are essential life skills for navigating the world and creating a life on your own terms.

Mental resilience doesn't mean being tough and unshakable. It's the ability to get back up after difficulties, learn from them, and try again – even if it means doing it slowly, anxiously, or fatigued. It's an inner strength you can build through daily choices, self-care, and seeking support when needed.

Psychological flexibility helps you avoid getting stuck in difficult emotions. It teaches you that you don't have to wait for the fear to disappear – you can act despite the anxiety. This helps you return to what really matters, instead of staying frozen in fear.

Personal development is not a race. It's not about doing better and quicker every day but about moving in a direction that makes sense to you – at your own pace, aligned with your values. Sometimes that means a micro step, just a change in mindset – and that's enough.

Remember: You really can learn this. You influence your mindset, habits, and choices. You don't have to be ready for everything – you just have to be ready to try.

It's not perfection, but consistency that builds your strength. In your way. At your pace. Without comparison, without pressure. That's what true growth looks like – the kind that lasts.

7 CONCLUSION

Entering the job market is one of the most important moments in life – full of hope, but also uncertainty. It’s a time of making your first career decisions, confronting external expectations, and discovering who you truly want to become as an adult. The goal isn’t to have all the answers right away or to pick the “perfect” path, but to experiment, learn as you go, and to give yourself the freedom to change. Instead of treating your first job as a final decision, it’s more helpful to see it as a testing ground – a chance to get to know yourself, your skills, and your preferences.

Experimentation is not chaos – it’s a conscious process of trying different options, gaining experience, and learning from it. Over time, this helps you better understand what motivates you, what kind of environment you thrive in, what to avoid, and what to develop. Alongside acting, it’s worth focusing on building soft skills and recognizing your strengths – for example, through skills assessments, conversations with mentors, or reflecting on past experiences.

It’s also important to remember that the job market isn’t just made up of “big corporations” – it also includes small businesses, start-ups, project-based work, freelancing, and the nonprofit sector. Each of these paths offers different opportunities and can be a valuable stage in your development. What matters most is making conscious decisions – and permitting yourself to adjust course when something no longer aligns with who you are.

Starting your professional journey takes courage, flexibility, and self-trust. You don’t need to have all the answers from day one. All it takes is a first step, an open mindset to new experiences, and the willingness to ask yourself the right questions. It’s through trying, reflecting, and learning that you build your career path – one that’s unique and truly yours.



Contemporary narratives about work, especially among young people, reveal a tension between high expectations (fulfilment, passion, independence) and the realities of the job market. Cultural and social messages — coming from both social media and family environments — often amplify the pressure to achieve instant career success, which can lead to frustration and a sense of inadequacy.

In light of modern career development theories (e.g., Hall, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006), it is worth promoting a phased, flexible, and self-aware approach. Work doesn't have to be solely a source of exploitation – it can become a space for growth when accompanied by a proactive attitude, a willingness to learn, and a realistic view of the current situation.

Therefore, there is a need to build a new language around the concept of work – one that combines aspirations with responsibility and supports young people in shaping a mature professional identity.

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9 GLOSSARY

Fixed mindset

The belief that one's abilities are static and cannot be changed significantly.

Mental resilience

The capacity to recover from stress, adapt to challenges, and continue pursuing goals despite difficulties.

Psychological flexibility

The skill of acting in alignment with one's values even when facing uncomfortable emotions.

Personal budget

A plan that outlines income, expenses, and savings to manage financial decisions effectively.

Financial safety threshold

The amount of money that provides security for several months of living costs in case of unexpected events.

Freedom fund

Savings dedicated to personal growth or life changes, providing flexibility beyond survival needs.

Employment contract

A formal agreement that offers stable work conditions, benefits, and legal protection under labor law.

B2B (Business- to-Business)

A form of independent cooperation where one business provides services to another instead of being an employee.

Startup

A young, innovative company focused on developing a new product or service, usually in a fast-changing environment.

Values

Core beliefs that guide decisions, behavior, and priorities in life and work.

SMART Goals

Objectives that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

Rejection

The experience of being declined or not accepted, that does not define personal worth.

**Broken Record
Technique**

An assertive communication tool where one calmly repeats their decision despite pressure.

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