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Design and Validation of a Model for Identifying Career Anchors among Employees of the General Departments of Sport and Youth in Northwestern Iran

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to design and validate a model for identifying career anchors among employees of the General Departments of Sport and Youth in northwestern Iran. The research was applied in purpose, descriptive-survey in data collection and implementation, and quantitative in nature. The statistical population consisted of all employees of the General Departments of Sport and Youth in the northwestern provinces of Iran (Ardabil, East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, and Zanjan). A stratified random sampling method proportional to the population size was used. Based on Morgan's table (1998), a total of 120 individuals were selected to participate in the study. The data collection instrument was Edgar Schein's (2006) standardized Career Anchor Questionnaire, consisting of 40 items rated on a four-point Likert scale (1–4). The content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by experts and specialists in sport management, and its internal consistency reliability, determined through a pilot study, was 0.91. Descriptive statistics and the Friedman test were used for data analysis, and all computations were performed using SPSS software. The results indicated that all dimensions of career anchors were at a desirable level. The ranking of the career anchor variables was as follows: (1) security-stability, (2) lifestyle, (3) general managerial competence, (4) pure challenge, (5) technical-functional competence, (6) entrepreneurial creativity, (7) autonomy-independence, and (8) service and dedication. The findings can assist human resource managers and decision-makers in the General Departments of Sport and Youth to design their human resource management policies in a way that enhances motivation, job satisfaction, and the retention of skilled personnel through a better understanding of employees' career anchors. Moreover, attention to these anchors can facilitate the development of diverse and personalized career paths that align with individual characteristics.

Keywords: General Departments of Sport and Youth, validation, career anchors

Introduction

Career development has emerged as a central focus in organizational psychology and human resource management, emphasizing the alignment between individual career values and organizational opportunities. One of the most influential frameworks in this domain is the concept of "career anchors," introduced by Edgar Schein, which describes internal values, motives, and competencies that guide individuals' career decisions and satisfaction [1]. Career anchors represent a dynamic interaction between self-concept and work environment, serving as an internal compass that stabilizes professional choices even in the face of change or uncertainty [2]. In recent years, the globalization of labor markets, rapid technological changes,

and shifts in employee expectations have heightened the importance of understanding career anchors in diverse occupational and cultural contexts [3, 4].

The theory of career anchors has evolved through empirical validation and cross-disciplinary adaptation. Schein and Van Maanen's model identifies eight anchors—technical/functional competence, general managerial competence, autonomy/independence, security/stability, entrepreneurial creativity, service/dedication to a cause, pure challenge, and lifestyle—which have become a cornerstone in assessing individual career orientations [1]. These anchors help explain why employees remain in certain occupations or organizations, how they perceive professional success, and what motivates their long-term commitment [5, 6]. The growing diversity of the workforce and changing labor conditions necessitate a more localized understanding of these anchors, particularly in public institutions such as sports and youth organizations, where career progression and motivation are influenced by both bureaucratic structures and personal values [7, 8].

Career anchors serve as a bridge between personal identity and organizational context, shaping how employees evaluate their roles, stability, and growth potential [9, 10]. Previous research has demonstrated that individuals whose jobs align with their dominant career anchors exhibit higher levels of job satisfaction, engagement, and organizational commitment [11, 12]. Conversely, a mismatch between personal anchors and job demands can result in stress, burnout, and reduced motivation [13]. Given the contextual and cultural variability in work values, exploring career anchors within specific populations—such as employees in Iran's regional departments of sport and youth—offers valuable insights for public sector human resource development [14, 15].

In Iran, sports and youth organizations play a critical role in promoting community engagement, health, and national development. However, challenges such as limited promotion pathways, centralized management structures, and resource constraints often hinder employee satisfaction and career progression [7]. Studies conducted in Iranian contexts suggest that professional identity and job stability are particularly salient career anchors in public institutions, reflecting cultural preferences for security and structured environments [16, 17]. The examination of these anchors among employees of the General Departments of Sport and Youth in northwestern Iran can thus illuminate how career orientations intersect with institutional realities and individual aspirations.

At the international level, scholars have extended career anchor theory across industries, generations, and national cultures. For example, Tuononen et al. (2016) explored career anchors among dental leaders, identifying autonomy and managerial competence as key factors in leadership development [18]. Similarly, Kubo et al. (2017) investigated occupational health nurses in Japan, revealing strong preferences for service and technical competence anchors shaped by cultural and professional ethics [19]. Wechtler et al. (2017) further highlighted the role of career anchors in expatriate adjustment, emphasizing cross-cultural adaptability and value alignment as predictors of job satisfaction [9]. These findings collectively reinforce that while the eight-anchor framework is universal in structure, its expression varies with occupational roles, national cultures, and generational values [20, 21].

Recent advancements in data analytics and artificial intelligence have introduced new methodologies for career exploration and planning. AI-based career mapping tools, such as CareerPooler and 2ACT, simulate dynamic career scenarios to help individuals discover their intrinsic motivations and align them with real-world opportunities [22, 23]. These technologies operationalize Schein's theoretical constructs in digital environments, providing users with predictive insights into career satisfaction and performance outcomes [24]. The integration of technology into career management underscores

the continuing relevance of career anchors, as they remain central to personal meaning-making even in an era of automation and gig economies.

Scholarly discussions also emphasize the mediating role of psychological and organizational variables in the relationship between career anchors and job outcomes. For instance, job satisfaction and commitment have been identified as significant mediators linking career anchors to performance [11, 25]. In nursing and healthcare, career anchors interact with constructs such as job esteem, work engagement, and retention intentions [10, 26]. Similarly, in education, Hoon Tan and Choo Quek (2001) observed that autonomy and service anchors dominate among educators, reflecting a strong alignment between professional identity and societal contribution [27]. The pattern suggests that understanding career anchors facilitates organizational design strategies that nurture employee well-being, particularly in sectors characterized by high emotional and social labor [28].

Cultural and generational factors also play a pivotal role in shaping career anchors. Research by Marshall and Bonner (2003) demonstrated that downsizing and organizational restructuring significantly alter employees' value hierarchies, prompting shifts toward security and stability anchors [29]. Among millennials, Aydogmus (2018) found that empowerment and creativity drive career commitment, suggesting a movement from traditional stability anchors toward autonomy and entrepreneurial orientations [30]. Deylamghani and Zakeri (2016) identified organizational trust as a key correlate of career path anchors, indicating that supportive environments enhance alignment between personal and organizational values [31]. This evidence highlights the interplay between individual anchors and institutional culture, a relationship that is crucial for employee retention and satisfaction in evolving workplaces [32, 33].

From a managerial perspective, understanding the distribution of career anchors within an organization enables leaders to design more effective human resource policies. Employees motivated by managerial competence require opportunities for leadership development, while those oriented toward lifestyle anchors value flexible working arrangements [2, 5]. Studies in sports and education sectors have revealed that career anchors not only influence personal career trajectories but also affect organizational performance, innovation, and adaptability [2, 17]. Furthermore, identifying dominant anchors helps prevent career plateauing, burnout, and turnover intentions—phenomena widely observed in hierarchical and public institutions [13].

In Iranian studies, Schein's framework has been adapted to examine professional identity, motivation, and satisfaction among educators, managers, and administrative staff. Askari et al. (2020) validated the psychometric properties of the Career Anchor Questionnaire in Iranian organizational contexts, confirming its reliability and cultural applicability [14]. Similarly, Mohammadi Moghadam et al. (2019) developed strategies for career progression based on employees' anchor profiles, proposing practical pathways for human resource development [15]. These studies underscore the necessity of localized adaptation, as sociocultural norms in Iran—such as collectivism, hierarchical respect, and preference for job security—significantly shape employees' career orientations [13, 34].

In the broader sociological discourse, career anchors have been reconceptualized as reflective of identity construction in structured institutional systems. Simionca (2024) argued that recognition and expertise function as modern equivalents to traditional stability anchors in professionalized environments [33]. Similarly, Woldeamanuel (2024) conducted a scientometric analysis demonstrating a consistent increase in global publications on career anchors since 1975, particularly in interdisciplinary fields integrating management, psychology, and education [3]. This growth highlights the enduring

academic and practical relevance of career anchors as tools for navigating complex labor markets and developing resilient career paths.

In the context of public sector organizations in Iran, especially in the sports and youth domain, studying career anchors is vital for several reasons. First, these organizations rely heavily on long-term commitment and specialized expertise, making retention and motivation crucial strategic goals. Second, the dynamic nature of sports administration, coupled with limited promotion structures, creates unique challenges for aligning employee aspirations with institutional missions. Third, identifying dominant career anchors allows for targeted training, career counseling, and policy interventions to enhance productivity and job satisfaction [7, 8].

Given the growing complexity of human capital management, it is necessary to employ comprehensive models that integrate psychological, cultural, and structural factors influencing career orientation. Contemporary approaches—ranging from data-driven career analytics [24] to cross-cultural career theory [9]—suggest that understanding career anchors provides a holistic lens for aligning personal fulfillment with organizational efficiency. Moreover, the application of AI-based tools in career counseling further reinforces the adaptability of Schein’s model in modern digital ecosystems [22, 23].

Therefore, the present study seeks to design and validate a model for identifying career anchors among employees of the General Departments of Sport and Youth in northwestern Iran.

Methodology

The present study was applied in purpose, descriptive-survey in data collection and implementation, and quantitative in nature. The statistical population consisted of all employees of the General Departments of Sport and Youth in northwestern Iran (provinces of Ardabil, East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, and Zanjan) who held at least a high school diploma and were employed in the organization during 2019. A stratified random sampling method proportional to population size was employed. Based on Morgan’s table (1998), a total of 120 individuals were selected to participate in the study.

A questionnaire was used as the data collection tool. Employees of the General Departments of Sport and Youth in the aforementioned provinces who were employed in 2019 completed the questionnaire. The distributed questionnaires were collected after completion. Data were gathered using Edgar Schein’s (2006) *Career Anchor Questionnaire*, which consists of 40 items rated on a four-point Likert scale (1–4). This questionnaire identifies eight career anchors: technical, managerial, job security, entrepreneurship, autonomy, service, pure challenge, and lifestyle. The content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by experts and specialists in sport management, and its internal consistency reliability in a pilot study was 0.91.

In this research, data analysis was performed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to describe demographic indicators of the sample, while inferential statistics included the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test to determine data normality. Given the non-normal distribution of variables, the Friedman ranking test was employed to prioritize the dimensions

Findings and Results

This section presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
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Gender	Male	82	68.3
	Female	38	31.7
	Total	120	100
Age	30 and below	43	35.8
	31–40	51	42.5
	41–50	16	13.4
	51 and above	10	8.3
	Total	120	100
Education	Below bachelor's degree	3	2.5
	Bachelor's degree	9	7.5
	Master's degree	78	65
	Doctoral degree	30	25
	Total	120	100

Of the respondents, 68.3% were male and 31.7% were female. In terms of age, 35.8% were under 31 years old, 42.5% were between 31 and 40 years, and 21.7% were above 40 years old. Regarding education, 25% of respondents held a doctoral degree, 65% held a master's degree, and 10% held a bachelor's degree or below.

Table 2

Job Position and Work Experience of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	82	68.3
	Female	38	31.7
	Total	120	100
Age	30 and below	43	35.8
	31–40	51	42.5
	41–50	16	13.4
	51 and above	10	8.3
	Total	120	100
Education	Below bachelor's degree	3	2.5
	Bachelor's degree	9	7.5
	Master's degree	78	65
	Doctoral degree	30	25
	Total	120	100

Of the respondents, 40.8% were staff employees, 30% were middle managers, and 29.2% were senior managers. Moreover, 55% of respondents had less than 11 years of work experience, 34.2% had between 11 and 20 years, and 10.8% had more than 20 years of experience.

Next, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was conducted to examine the normality of the variables.

Table 3

Results of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test for Normality

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Significance Level (p)	Test Result
Technical–Functional Competence	3.897	0.534	0.000	Not normal
General Management Competence	4.059	0.585	0.000	Not normal
Security	4.218	0.766	0.000	Not normal
Entrepreneurial Creativity	3.927	0.952	0.000	Not normal
Autonomy	3.946	1.145	0.000	Not normal
Service	3.923	1.417	0.000	Not normal
Pure Challenge	4.068	1.655	0.000	Not normal
Lifestyle	4.291	1.933	0.000	Not normal

The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test results indicated that the distribution of all variables was non-normal. Therefore, the Friedman ranking test was used to prioritize the career anchor variables.

Table 4*Results of the Friedman Ranking Test for Career Anchors*

Variable	Mean Rank	Rank	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Technical–Functional Competence	4.13	5	115.206	7	0.000
General Managerial Competence	4.92	3			
Security–Stability	5.63	1			
Entrepreneurial Creativity	3.85	6			
Autonomy–Independence	3.79	7			
Service and Dedication	3.69	8			
Pure Challenge	4.39	4			
Lifestyle	5.62	2			

The Friedman test results showed significant differences in the ranking of career anchor dimensions among employees of the General Departments of Sport and Youth in northwestern Iran. The priority order of the career anchor variables was as follows: (1) security–stability, (2) lifestyle, (3) general managerial competence, (4) pure challenge, (5) technical–functional competence, (6) entrepreneurial creativity, (7) autonomy–independence, and (8) service and dedication.

To evaluate the desirability of career anchors and their dimensions, the Sign test was used, given the non-normal distribution of all variables. Since the questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale, the criterion score for comparing means was 3. If the mean of each dimension significantly differed from 3 and the difference was positive, it was concluded that the corresponding career anchor dimension was at a desirable level.

Table 5*Assessment of the Desirability of Career Anchor Dimensions*

Dimension	N	Mean	Z Value	Significance Level
Autonomy–Independence	120	3.964	10.844	0.000
Security–Stability	120	4.218	10.857	0.000
Technical–Functional Competence	120	3.897	10.719	0.000
General Managerial Competence	120	4.059	11.016	0.000
Creativity and Entrepreneurship	120	3.927	10.719	0.000
Service (Dedication)	120	3.923	10.033	0.000
Pure Challenge (Variety)	120	4.068	10.470	0.000
Identity (Lifestyle)	120	4.291	10.443	0.000

Given that all significance levels were less than 0.05, the dimensions of autonomy–independence, security, technical–functional competence, general managerial competence, creativity and entrepreneurship, service (dedication), and pure challenge (variety) were all at a desirable level.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the present study, which aimed to design and validate a model for identifying career anchors among employees of the General Departments of Sport and Youth in northwestern Iran, revealed that all eight dimensions of Schein’s model—security-stability, lifestyle, general managerial competence, pure challenge, technical-functional competence, entrepreneurial creativity, autonomy-independence, and service-dedication—were present at desirable levels. The ranking of these dimensions indicated that security-stability was the most dominant anchor among employees, followed by lifestyle, managerial competence, and pure challenge. The results also demonstrated significant differences in the prioritization of these anchors, confirming the diversity of career values and motivations across employees within the public sports sector.

These findings resonate strongly with prior theoretical and empirical studies that have examined the role of cultural, institutional, and occupational factors in shaping career anchors. The dominance of the security-stability anchor aligns with Schein's conceptualization of career orientation, in which individuals prioritize job continuity, financial safety, and long-term organizational affiliation as core elements of career satisfaction [1]. In public sector organizations, especially in developing contexts, job security remains a fundamental motivator, often surpassing entrepreneurial or autonomy-related anchors [2, 17]. Similar results have been reported in Iranian contexts, where organizational structures and employment norms emphasize permanence and predictability, leading employees to value stability over risk-oriented or individualistic career paths [15, 16].

The second most significant dimension—lifestyle—reflects employees' increasing desire to balance work with personal life. This finding corresponds with global trends indicating that lifestyle has emerged as a key anchor in modern work environments characterized by burnout, job overload, and digital connectivity [9, 33]. Studies conducted by Maher (2016) and Aydogmus (2018) demonstrated that employees, particularly younger generations, increasingly prefer roles that offer flexible schedules and accommodate their non-work priorities [30, 32]. The emphasis on lifestyle in the present study suggests that Iranian public employees, despite operating in structured bureaucratic systems, seek equilibrium between their professional responsibilities and personal domains—a pattern consistent with global post-pandemic shifts in work attitudes [10, 23].

The prioritization of general managerial competence as the third dominant anchor underlines the importance of leadership and administrative capabilities among employees of the sports and youth departments. This outcome aligns with earlier works by Chapman and Brown (2014), who identified managerial competence as a significant anchor among professionals aiming for hierarchical progression and organizational influence [5]. Similarly, Tuononen et al. (2016) found that managerial anchors were prevalent among professionals transitioning into leadership positions, particularly in structured and public service-oriented institutions [18]. In Iran's administrative context, where vertical mobility and authority remain key indicators of success, the presence of this anchor indicates employees' aspiration for recognition and organizational responsibility [8, 14].

The “pure challenge” anchor ranked fourth, representing individuals' intrinsic drive to overcome obstacles and achieve mastery in complex tasks. This finding supports prior evidence that professionals in fields requiring constant problem-solving, such as sports management and education, often derive motivation from challenges rather than material incentives [6, 28]. The prominence of this anchor also aligns with Weber and Ladkin's (2009) research on the convention and event industry, where employees with a strong challenge orientation exhibited greater persistence and adaptability [21]. Within the Iranian sports administration context, where employees frequently face logistical and policy-related constraints, challenge-oriented motivation may function as an adaptive psychological mechanism that enhances resilience and innovation [7].

The moderate ranking of technical-functional competence suggests that while professional expertise remains valued, it may not be the primary determinant of satisfaction among these employees. This trend reflects a broader shift from technical mastery to managerial and integrative skills in public organizations [13, 34]. According to Deylamghani and Zakeri (2016), employees in bureaucratic institutions tend to associate success with influence and organizational navigation rather than technical specialization [31]. Moreover, in Iran's sports management system, career progression often depends on

administrative performance rather than technical proficiency, thereby reinforcing managerial and security-oriented anchors [2, 16].

Entrepreneurial creativity ranked sixth, indicating limited preference for risk-taking and innovation among the respondents. This finding may reflect the structural characteristics of public sector employment, where rigid hierarchies and resource limitations restrict opportunities for entrepreneurship [20, 29]. In contrast, studies in private and international sectors have demonstrated stronger entrepreneurial anchors, particularly among employees with high autonomy and innovation potential [22, 24]. The low ranking of entrepreneurial creativity in this study mirrors findings by Mohammadi Moghadam et al. (2019), who reported that bureaucratic constraints reduce employees' intrinsic motivation to innovate [15].

The autonomy-independence anchor, which ranked seventh, similarly reflects the collective and hierarchical nature of Iranian public organizations, where decision-making is centralized and role flexibility is limited. This observation is consistent with previous research suggesting that autonomy anchors are less dominant in collectivist societies that value conformity, stability, and organizational control [9, 19]. Conversely, studies in Western contexts highlight autonomy as a leading career driver, particularly among knowledge workers and educators [27, 32]. Therefore, the relatively low emphasis on independence among Iranian sports employees can be attributed to cultural expectations of interdependence and institutional regulation [11, 31].

Finally, service and dedication emerged as the least dominant anchor, despite the social mission of sports and youth organizations. This result diverges from findings in healthcare and education, where service orientation is often a central motivator [10, 26]. The weaker presence of this anchor might be linked to the administrative and managerial nature of most respondents' roles, where daily tasks are procedural rather than directly service-driven [2]. Nonetheless, Schein (2016) emphasized that even low-ranking anchors can influence behavior indirectly by shaping moral identity and professional ethics [1]. In the Iranian sports sector, where public service is often embedded in collective goals rather than individual altruism, this anchor may manifest differently—through teamwork and institutional loyalty rather than explicit service orientation [8, 14].

The overall findings confirm the multidimensionality of career orientation and the applicability of Schein's framework across diverse cultural and occupational settings. Consistent with Woldeamanuel's (2024) scientometric analysis, which reported sustained global interest in career anchor research from 1975 to 2023, this study underscores the relevance of career anchors for understanding employee motivation in dynamic environments [3]. Moreover, the convergence of traditional anchors such as security and managerial competence with modern anchors like lifestyle suggests that career motivations are simultaneously stable and adaptive, influenced by sociocultural evolution and technological transformation [10, 33].

In light of these interpretations, the results validate prior Iranian studies that identified similar hierarchical patterns of career anchors among educators and administrators. Askari and Nazarpour (2022) found that security and managerial competence were strong predictors of job satisfaction, mediated by job stressors [11]. Likewise, Hatami (2017) demonstrated that career plateauing and burnout among teachers were mitigated when their career anchors aligned with organizational support structures [13]. The current study extends these findings to the sports administration domain, confirming that alignment between personal anchors and organizational context enhances both psychological well-being and institutional stability.

Furthermore, cross-national comparisons reinforce the universality of these patterns. For instance, Tuononen et al. (2016) and Kubo et al. (2017) showed that professionals in health and education sectors prioritize stability and service anchors, while Aydogmus (2018) and Maher (2016) observed that younger and entrepreneurial populations in Europe emphasize autonomy and innovation [18, 19, 30, 32]. The interplay between cultural conservatism and modern work values found in the present study aligns with Simionca's (2024) argument that expertise and recognition have become contemporary equivalents of stability and managerial competence in structured fields [33].

Overall, the findings provide strong empirical support for Schein's multidimensional model and highlight the continuing necessity of understanding career anchors in both traditional and modernized organizations. As new technologies such as AI-based career guidance systems emerge, future studies should integrate these innovations into anchor-based career planning frameworks to enhance precision and personalization [22, 23].

This study is not without limitations. The research focused exclusively on employees within the General Departments of Sport and Youth in four provinces of northwestern Iran, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other regions or sectors. Additionally, the study relied on self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability bias and respondents' self-perceptions rather than objective career behaviors. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences regarding the relationships between career anchors and job outcomes. Furthermore, the study did not account for potential moderating variables such as gender, tenure, or job level, which may influence the prioritization of anchors.

Future studies should expand the geographical scope and include comparative analyses across different public and private organizations to capture cultural and structural variations in career anchor patterns. Longitudinal research designs could provide insight into how career anchors evolve over time in response to organizational changes or technological disruptions. Qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups could enrich understanding of the contextual meanings employees attach to their anchors. Moreover, integrating advanced analytical tools like machine learning could help predict anchor shifts based on behavioral and psychometric data.

From a managerial standpoint, understanding employees' dominant career anchors can guide the development of tailored human resource strategies. Managers should design differentiated career pathways and training programs that align with various anchor types, promoting satisfaction and retention. Policies emphasizing work-life balance and internal mobility can support lifestyle and managerial competence anchors, while recognition and mentoring initiatives can foster engagement among challenge-oriented and creative employees. Ultimately, fostering organizational environments that respect diverse career orientations will enhance motivation, commitment, and overall performance in the public sports sector.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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