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The New Career Paradigm of Indonesian Youth

An Analysis of Career Preference Shifts in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the shifting career preferences of Indonesian youth, who are increasingly moving from formal employment toward informal and flexible work models. Using a mixed-methods approach that integrates national statistics from Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS), regional survey data, and literature analysis, the study identifies key socio-economic and cultural drivers behind this transition. Findings are organized into three themes: the growing prevalence of informal work among young people, rising demand for flexibility in income generation and work arrangements, and the broader socio-economic implications for stability, skills development, and long-term employability. The study concludes that this shift reflects both structural labour-market changes and evolving youth aspirations. It recommends strengthening policy support for youth entrepreneurship, integrating flexible-work competencies into education and training, and improving social protection mechanisms to ensure sustainable participation in an increasingly informal economy.

Keywords

Career Motivation

Indonesian Youth

Informal Employment

Labor Market Trends

Work Flexibility

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Introduction

The world of work is undergoing a profound and multidimensional transformation, particularly among youth in emerging economies such as Indonesia. Traditionally, securing a stable position in the civil service or a well-established private company was widely regarded as the ultimate indicator of professional success and social mobility. Such careers symbolized financial security, long-term stability, and social prestige. However, this long-standing perception is rapidly eroding in the face of economic restructuring, technological advancement, and shifting generational values. Young Indonesians today increasingly gravitate toward career models that prioritize personal freedom, self-determination, creativity, and life satisfaction over income security and organizational loyalty. These changes reflect a broader redefinition of meaningful work, in which psychological fulfillment, autonomy, and alignment with personal values are considered more important than job titles, hierarchical positions, or tenure within an organization [1], [2].

This transformation is clearly reflected in national employment trends. According to the latest labor force data from the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik or BPS), more than half of Indonesia's workforce has been consistently engaged in the informal sector, with figures remaining above 57% from 2019 to 2025 [3], [4], [5]. These persistently high proportions indicate not only structural gaps in the availability and accessibility of formal employment opportunities, but also a growing normalization of informal work arrangements. Importantly, this trend is not driven solely by necessity. Increasingly, young people voluntarily choose informal and flexible work modes, including freelancing, digital entrepreneurship, online trading, ride-hailing services, and content creation. These career pathways are often enabled by rapid digitalization, widespread smartphone use, and the expansion of social media platforms and e-commerce ecosystems [6], [7]. Rather than pursuing advancement within rigid corporate hierarchies, many young Indonesians prefer to build personal brands, launch small digital startups, or monetize creative skills that align with their interests, lifestyles, and digital fluency.

Given the scale and implications of this shift, this study aims to critically analyze the evolving career aspirations and work behaviors of Indonesian youth. It investigates how socio-economic factors, digital technology, and cultural values collectively shape preferences for informal, flexible, and non-standard employment. The analysis recognizes that youth employment choices are influenced not only by labor market conditions, but also by broader aspirations related to independence, work–life balance, and self-actualization. By drawing on national statistics, regional surveys, and relevant scholarly literature, this study seeks to unpack the key drivers and consequences of these trends. Ultimately, it aims to contribute to

academic discourse and inform policy frameworks capable of supporting sustainable, inclusive, and youth-responsive labor markets in Indonesia [8], [9].

These changes mirror broader global shifts in employment patterns, particularly the expansion of flexible, platform-based, and gig-oriented work arrangements that emphasize autonomy, time management, and digital engagement over traditional notions of job stability and organizational hierarchy. International studies consistently highlight that millennials and Generation Z are more inclined to pursue careers that resonate with their personal values, lifestyle aspirations, and desire for self-expression, rather than conforming to rigid corporate cultures characterized by fixed schedules and limited flexibility [7], [10], [11], [12]. This global tendency is increasingly visible in the Indonesian context, where youth actively leverage online platforms to access freelance opportunities, develop creative enterprises, and monetize social media presence through content production, endorsements, and digital services [3], [4]. As a result, work is no longer confined to physical offices or standard working hours, but is increasingly fluid, decentralized, and digitally mediated.

While these shifts create new opportunities for autonomy, innovation, and economic participation, they also introduce significant risks and challenges. Informal and flexible employment is often associated with job precarity, unstable income, limited career progression, and an absence of legal protection. In Indonesia, many informal sector workers remain excluded from national insurance systems, pension schemes, and formal mechanisms for skills certification, which exacerbates their vulnerability to economic shocks, health risks, and long-term insecurity [3], [13]. This situation underscores a critical dilemma for policymakers: how to reconcile the growing demand for labor flexibility with the need to ensure equitable access to social protection, skills recognition, and opportunities for upward mobility.

This study therefore aims to critically examine the evolving career landscape among Indonesian youth, with particular attention to processes of informalization and preferences for flexible work arrangements. By analyzing labor force statistics, regional survey data, and existing literature, this paper seeks to uncover the underlying motivations, socio-economic implications, and educational challenges arising from this transformation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing responsive education systems, labor regulations, and social protection policies that align with contemporary youth aspirations. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors shaping youth employment in the digital era and proposes actionable policy and educational reforms to support sustainable and inclusive workforce participation in Indonesia [8], [12], [14]. The findings are expected to inform evidence-based policymaking and educational strategies addressing youth employment transitions in Indonesia.

Materials and Methods

A. Research Design and Data Sources

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to capture both the structural patterns and contextual meanings underlying youth employment transformations in Indonesia. Quantitative data were primarily obtained from national labor force surveys published by the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik or BPS), which provide longitudinal insights into employment status, sectoral distribution, and workforce characteristics. To complement these data, macroeconomic indicators related to labor policy, fiscal conditions, and workforce development were sourced from official publications of Indonesia's Ministry of Finance. These datasets enable a comprehensive examination of macro-level labor trends and their alignment with broader economic dynamics.

Additional quantitative insights into youth work preferences, flexibility expectations, and changing career orientations were drawn from regional and global surveys, including those conducted by Qualtrics [2] and Business Today [15]. These sources were selected to contextualize Indonesian youth trends within wider international developments. Furthermore, empirical findings from peer-reviewed academic articles were incorporated to strengthen analytical rigor and triangulate survey-based evidence [11], [15], [16]. The integration of national statistics with global survey data allows for comparative interpretation while maintaining sensitivity to Indonesia's socio-economic context.

B. Qualitative Analysis and Thematic Framework

Qualitative data were derived from an extensive review of scholarly literature addressing youth values, education policy, labor market transformation, and digital work dynamics. These sources include journal articles, policy reports, and conceptual studies that explore how technological change and generational shifts reshape employment meanings and aspirations. The qualitative component emphasizes interpretation rather than measurement, aiming to uncover underlying motivations, normative orientations, and structural implications associated with non-standard work.

All qualitative materials were subjected to thematic analysis. Through iterative reading and coding, key patterns were identified and systematically organized into three core analytical areas:

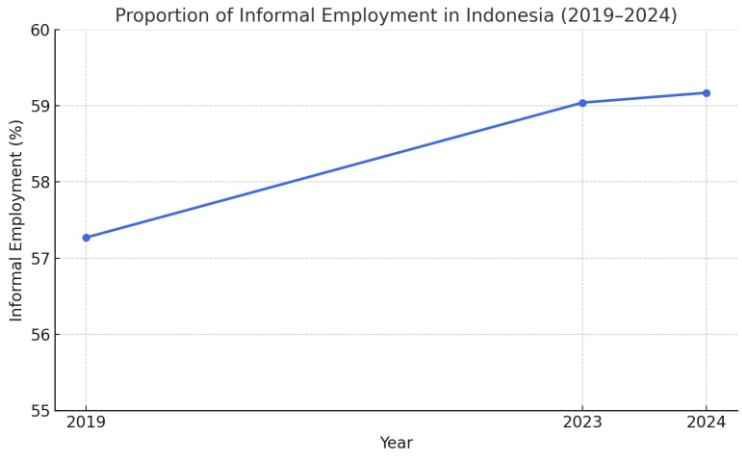
- informal employment trends, highlighting the normalization and drivers of non-formal work;
- preferences for work flexibility, including autonomy over time, location, and output; and
- socio-economic and educational implications, particularly concerning skills development, social protection, and policy responsiveness.

This thematic framework provides an integrative lens through which quantitative findings are interpreted, ensuring coherence between empirical trends and conceptual insights.

Results and Discussion

A. Prevalence of Informal Employment

According to Sakernas 2024, informal employment in Indonesia accounts for 59.17% of total employment, involving approximately 84.13 million workers [3], [13]. This proportion reflects a steady increase from 57.27% in 2019 to 59.04% in 2023, indicating the persistent dominance of informal labor within the national workforce [3], [4], [5]. The trend became more pronounced in the post-COVID-19 period, as economic disruptions and organizational downsizing compelled many workers to shift from formal employment into self-employment, micro-enterprises, and family-based economic activities.



Source: Sakernas/ BPS

Fig. 1. Proportion of Informal Employment in Total Employment

Regionally, urban areas report a lower informal employment rate of 43.26% compared to rural regions, where the figure reaches 53.99% [3], [13]. This disparity highlights persistent structural inequalities between urban and rural labor markets, particularly in terms of access to formal employment, education, and industrial development. Informal work in Indonesia encompasses a wide range of employment forms that lack legal recognition or adequate labor protection, including self-employment without official registration, unpaid family labor, casual daily work, and informal assistance roles. These forms of work are often characterized by low entry barriers, limited job security, and minimal access to social protection mechanisms, making them both accessible and vulnerable forms of employment.

This pattern of labor segmentation closely aligns with the concept of dual labor market theory, which posits that modern economies are divided into two distinct sectors: a primary sector characterized by stable employment, formal contracts, and social protection, and a secondary sector marked by informal, insecure, and low-wage work [8], [17]. Within this

framework, the informal sector functions as an absorptive space for surplus labor that cannot be accommodated by the formal economy. Barriers such as mismatches between educational qualifications and labor market demands, limited industrial expansion, and institutional rigidity in recruitment and regulation contribute to the exclusion of certain groups, particularly youth, from the primary labor market.

In the Indonesian context, this dual structure is especially pronounced in rural areas, where educational attainment levels are generally lower and formal job opportunities remain scarce. The concentration of informal employment in these regions reflects long-standing development gaps and uneven economic transformation. For many young people, especially those transitioning from education to work, entry into the formal economy is constrained by competition, credential requirements, and limited local opportunities. As a result, informal work is often perceived as a pragmatic and accessible alternative that offers immediate income generation, relative autonomy, and flexible entry points into economic activity.

However, the growing engagement of youth in informal employment is not solely driven by structural necessity. Drawing on the concept of precarity in contemporary labor studies, scholars argue that uncertainty and instability have become normalized features of modern work, particularly for younger generations [5], [11], [12]. In this context, many young people consciously embrace non-traditional and insecure job paths as expressions of identity, self-direction, and resistance to rigid corporate norms. Flexibility, autonomy, and personal meaning are often valued over long-term security, reshaping conventional definitions of career success. Consequently, the coexistence of structural labor market constraints and shifting cultural values contributes to a generational realignment of work aspirations in Indonesia, reinforcing the persistence and transformation of informal employment.

B. Demand for Work Flexibility

In Southeast Asia, survey data indicate that 60% of employees prioritize flexible work arrangements over a shorter workweek, underscoring the growing importance of adaptability in modern employment [2], [14]. Specifically, 33% of workers value greater control over their working hours, reflecting a desire for autonomy and improved work–life balance. Meanwhile, 24% seek location independence through remote or hybrid work models, and 18% prefer performance evaluation based on outputs rather than time spent working. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the adoption of remote work practices, positioning flexibility as a key determinant of job satisfaction, productivity, and employee retention across the region [1], [18].

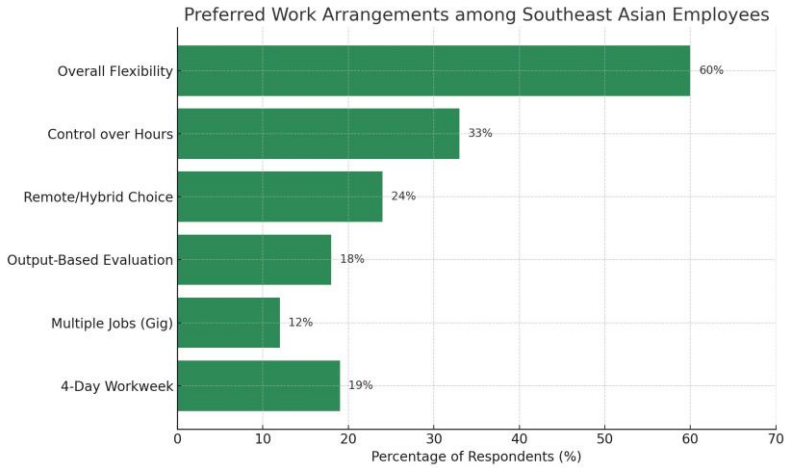


Fig. 2. Preferred Word arrangement

Based on regional survey findings, Southeast Asian employees demonstrate a strong preference for flexible work arrangements. Table 1 presents key patterns in work arrangement preferences, highlighting the growing importance of autonomy over time, location, and performance assessment in shaping contemporary employment expectations across the region.

Table 1. Preferred Work Arrangements among Southeast Asian Employees

Work Arrangement Aspect	Percentage	Description
Overall preference for flexibility	60%	A significant majority of respondents prioritize flexible work arrangements, indicating that adaptability in time and structure is valued more than reduced working days.
Control over work hours	33%	One-third of workers express a strong preference for autonomy in managing daily work schedules to balance productivity, personal responsibilities, and overall well-being.
Remote/hybrid location choice	24%	Nearly a quarter of respondents favor remote or hybrid work models, allowing them to choose work locations that enhance comfort, efficiency, and work–life balance.
Performance/output-based system	18%	A notable proportion prefer performance evaluation based on outputs and deliverables rather than fixed hours, reflecting a results-oriented work culture.
Ability to combine multiple jobs	12%	Some workers seek opportunities to engage in multiple jobs or side projects, highlighting growing interest in gig economy participation and diversified income sources.
Shorter workweek (4 days)	19%	Almost one-fifth of respondents support a condensed four-day workweek, aiming to improve work–life balance without compromising productivity.

Moreover, 35% of employees in the Asia-Pacific region reported a willingness to leave jobs that require full on-site presence, indicating a substantial shift in employee expectations regarding where and how work should be performed [1], [2], [15]. This finding reflects a broader reassessment of traditional workplace norms, particularly among younger workers who increasingly associate rigid on-site requirements with reduced autonomy and diminished

well-being. In Indonesia, this inclination toward flexibility and spatial autonomy is strongly evident in the career preferences of youth, who prioritize psychological well-being, independence, and work–life integration over conventional job benefits such as long-term contracts or hierarchical advancement [12], [19]. For many young workers, the ability to manage time and location is not a peripheral advantage but a central component of job satisfaction and personal fulfillment.

From a theoretical perspective, these preferences align closely with Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs underlying motivation and well-being. Within this framework, flexible work arrangements enable individuals to exercise greater control over their activities, develop competencies in diverse contexts, and maintain meaningful social connections beyond the workplace. Consequently, the growing demand for flexible work should not be interpreted merely as a temporary response to labor market disruptions or pandemic-related adjustments. Rather, it reflects a deeper shift toward work models that support intrinsic motivation and holistic well-being. Flexibility becomes a mechanism through which workers seek psychological need fulfillment, rather than simply an instrument for convenience or efficiency.

Comparative international studies further reinforce this interpretation. In Japan and South Korea, for instance, younger generations have increasingly questioned the sustainability of long working hours, rigid seniority systems, and deeply entrenched organizational hierarchies. Research in these contexts shows a growing preference among youth for flexible career pathways that allow for personal growth, skill diversification, and improved quality of life [20], [21]. This resistance to traditional employment structures signals a gradual cultural transformation in societies long characterized by strong work discipline and organizational loyalty. Younger workers are redefining success in terms of balance, purpose, and self-development, rather than endurance within demanding corporate environments.

Similar patterns are observable in the United States and Western Europe, where the expansion of the gig economy has normalized portfolio careers. In these models, individuals engage in multiple short-term projects, freelance contracts, or entrepreneurial activities instead of committing to a single long-term occupation. Such arrangements allow workers to diversify income sources, explore varied professional identities, and maintain flexibility across different life stages. Although the Indonesian context differs in terms of social protection systems, labor regulation, and economic structure, the underlying motivations driving these choices are strikingly similar. Across regions, younger generations seek autonomy, meaningful engagement, and alignment between work and personal values.

Taken together, these trends underscore a global generational reconfiguration of work values. The convergence of technological enablement, particularly digital platforms and remote work tools, with changing social norms is reshaping labor market structures and redefining the meaning of work. For Indonesian youth, flexible work arrangements represent not only economic opportunity but also a pathway toward self-determination and psychological well-being, positioning flexibility as a defining feature of contemporary and future employment landscapes.

C. Socio-Economic and Educational Implications

Despite the growing appeal of informal and flexible work arrangements, this sector is frequently associated with significant challenges, including income instability, limited opportunities for career advancement, and the absence of enforceable labor rights [12], [16], [22]. Workers engaged in informal employment commonly lack access to pensions, health insurance, and formal legal protections, increasing their vulnerability to economic shocks and health risks. Over time, these conditions may exacerbate inequality and undermine long-term financial security, particularly for young workers who remain outside formal social protection and institutional support systems.

Manufacturing, which has traditionally been expected to absorb large segments of the workforce, has not kept pace with the employment needs of Indonesia's rapidly growing youth population [3], [23]. These structural labor market constraints are further intensified by slow adaptation within the education sector. Many current curricula remain oriented toward industrial-era employment models, offering limited preparation for entrepreneurship, freelancing, or participation in digital gig-based work, which increasingly define contemporary labor markets [12].

Table 2. Policy and Educational Responses to Youth Employment Trends

Policy Area	Improved Recommendation
Education	Education policies should systematically integrate digital literacy, critical thinking, soft skills, and entrepreneurship into formal and informal curricula to prepare learners for adaptive careers, innovation-driven economies, and the evolving demands of digital and gig-based labor markets.
Social Protection	Social protection systems need to provide portable benefits, inclusive social security schemes, and health coverage tailored for freelancers and gig workers, ensuring income stability, risk mitigation, and long-term welfare despite non-standard and flexible employment arrangements.
Labor Regulation	Labor regulations should formally recognize gig and platform workers, simplify registration and compliance mechanisms, and establish minimum standards for wages, contracts, and dispute resolution to ensure fairness, legal certainty, and worker protection.
Training	Training policies should promote lifelong learning through continuous upskilling, reskilling, and hybrid vocational pathways that combine online and workplace-based learning, enabling workers to remain competitive amid technological change and labor market transformation.

Without reform, youth engagement in informal work may reinforce social stratification and perpetuate cycles of inequality, particularly in labor markets where mobility from informal to formal sectors remains limited. Prolonged participation in informal employment can constrain access to stable income, social protection, and professional development, thereby reproducing structural disadvantages across generations. In such contexts, young workers may become locked into precarious trajectories, where limited skills recognition and weak institutional support reduce their chances of upward mobility. This risk is especially acute in emerging economies, where informal work is widespread and formal sector absorption remains insufficient. Consequently, addressing informalization is not merely a labor market issue, but a broader challenge linked to social equity and long-term development outcomes.

To mitigate these risks, scholars emphasize the importance of creating an enabling environment through coordinated policy interventions across education, labor, and finance ministries. Such coordination is necessary to ensure policy coherence, reduce fragmentation, and align workforce development with labor market realities. Inclusive policy design and responsive governance mechanisms are particularly critical in accommodating diverse employment forms, including freelancing, gig work, and digital entrepreneurship [12], [22]. By integrating labor regulation with education reform and social protection systems, governments can better support young workers navigating non-standard career paths while safeguarding their economic security and well-being.

One promising approach is reflected in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) framework for recognizing non-formal and informal learning. This model has been piloted in several European countries, including Finland and Portugal, where skills acquired outside formal education systems are formally assessed and certified [24], [25], [26]. Through structured recognition and validation mechanisms, informal workers can access vocational upgrading opportunities, training subsidies, and public employment services. These schemes not only enhance individual employability but also improve labor market transparency by linking demonstrated competencies to recognized qualifications.

In addition to European experiences, several Asia-Pacific countries have implemented forward-looking workforce development policies. Singapore's SkillsFuture initiative represents a national movement that encourages lifelong learning and continuous skills mastery, enabling citizens to adapt to rapidly changing job markets. The program provides flexible learning credits, industry-aligned training, and strong employer engagement, making skills development accessible across different career stages. Similarly, Australia's National Microcredentials Framework is transforming how education institutions deliver modular, on-demand learning tailored to both traditional employees and gig economy participants. These

initiatives reflect a shift away from rigid, degree-centric models toward flexible, competency-based systems.

A shared principle across these international initiatives is the prioritization of portable, verifiable, and market-relevant competencies over formal degrees or institutional prestige. By emphasizing skills portability, these systems allow workers to transition more easily across sectors and employment types. This approach is particularly relevant in contexts characterized by rapid technological change, where continuous upskilling and reskilling are essential for workforce resilience.

Indonesia can draw valuable lessons from these experiences by embedding flexible, digitally accessible learning pathways within national curricula, while simultaneously strengthening legal and social protections for emerging forms of work. By doing so, the country can reduce vulnerability among informal workers, foster inclusive innovation, and cultivate a labor force that is more adaptable to automation and technological disruption, thereby supporting sustainable and equitable economic development [15], [16], [27].

Conclusion

The evolving aspirations of Indonesian youth reflect the emergence of a new work ethic grounded in autonomy, digital competence, and the pursuit of meaningful engagement. With more than half of the national workforce employed in informal sectors and flexibility increasingly shaping career preferences, existing institutional frameworks face growing pressure to adapt. Education systems must move beyond traditional, linear employment models by cultivating adaptive skills, digital literacy, and entrepreneurial capacities aligned with contemporary labor realities. At the same time, labor regulations need to formally recognize emerging career paths, including freelance and platform-based work, while ensuring adequate protection. This new paradigm presents significant opportunities only if supported by inclusive, forward-looking, and coordinated policy responses.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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