



Reasons behind Career Drift in It Sector and Its Impact on Employee Satisfaction and Productivity

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Abstract

Career drift, defined as the gradual shift away from an individual's originally intended career path, has become a significant phenomenon in the rapidly evolving IT sector. This research explores the factors contributing to career drift among IT professionals examining how elements such as burnout, skill obsolescence, job dissatisfaction and changing personal interests influence career trajectories. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study collects quantitative data through surveys and qualitative insights via open-ended responses from IT workers across various specializations and experienced levels. Preliminary findings indicate a substantial proportion of IT professionals experience career drift due to high stress levels, rapid technological advancements requiring continuous reskilling and a lack of clear growth opportunities. The study also investigates how career drift impacts overall job satisfaction and future career plans. The results aim to inform organizational strategies and individual career management practices to better support IT professionals in navigating career transitions and enhancing job fulfillment. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of career development challenges in the IT industry and offers practical recommendations for reducing involuntary career drift.

Keywords: Career drift, turnover, dissatisfaction, job opportunities, self-actualization.

Introduction

Everyone has single beautiful life. In that life you are deciding who are you and who would be live in that whole life by choosing any career as goal of your life. You studied in schools and after 10th, choosing one specific group in 11th standard and completing your studies in 12th. After 12th, a turning point of your life, you have many choices and choosing one as a career is a difficult one. You can choose any one, may be doctor, engineer, teacher, lawyer, businessman etc. but the talent or interest inside you is only one. Let us specifically see IT sector, there is no specific eligibility criteria for the people entering into IT, any people regardless of their field who learned specific skills like coding entering into it, after some years they felt unhappiness in their job and moving away from their current job. This phenomenon is called career drift. Career drift is the term refers to moving from the currently working field to desired career goal. In this research we will find out why graduates work outside their field of study and consequences of career drift and suggestions to avoid career drift and preventive measures.

Drifters can be distinguished as those who 'float' and those who 'flow' from career to career. According to Kato and

Suzuki, "floating implies no conscious concern with a career path. Flowing is more purposive and allows for a career quest." Flow-ers may be those with occupational backgrounds related to or connected with their desired career goal. "floaters" likely have backgrounds in any manner of occupations, with evidence of haphazard resignation and job seeking. "flow-ers" were defined as those whose work histories reflected mindfulness application to positions with a career trajectory in mind. This career drift happens often in IT sector, they switch jobs, change roles, or leave the IT sector, because work changes fast (new tools, AI), demands are high, and employees look for faster pay and learning. Several surveys show meaningful turnover and high burnout in tech. Reports from the ministry of higher education (MOHE) reveal that more than 18.5% of college graduates remain unemployed upon graduation, while another proportion are employed in fields unrelated to their training and skills. Additionally, 0.8% requires further skills training to meet market expectations (MOHE, 2021). The transformative forces of the fourth industrial revolution (IR 4.0) and emerging technologies such as automation, artificial intelligence and digitalization are reshaping global labor markets, thereby demanding graduates who are innovative,

flexible, and equipped with strong transferable skills employability (Rotatori *et al.*, 2021). Due to lack of skills and interest in that field career drift happens. This phenomenon highlights a mismatch between educational outcomes and labour market requirements. Importantly, such employability gaps are caused not only by deficiencies in technical skills but also by the influence of psycho-social factors including career self-efficacy, dysfunctional career thinking, and parental career behavior on students' readiness to enter and sustain meaningful employment (Bakker, 2022; to *et al.*, 2022 a).

Career self-efficacy, rooted in Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and further advanced by the social cognitive career theory (SCCT), refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to perform career-related tasks such as planning, goal setting, and decision-making (Lee *et al.*, 2022; Doganulku & Korkmaz, 2023). High career self-efficacy has consistently been associated with persistence, ambitious career aspirations, and pro-active job-seeking behaviors, whereas low self-efficacy often contributes to indecision, reduced motivation, and limited exploration of career opportunities. Dysfunctional career thinking conceptualized within cognitive information processing (CIP) theory refers to irrational beliefs and maladaptive cognitive patterns that hinder effective career decision making (Unnikrishnan & Rajeev, 2024). Students with dysfunctional thoughts often confused about career pathways, afraid about their future, or external conflicts that impair rational decision making (S Li & Lee., 2025a). This issue is particularly faced by the students who don't know about more career opportunities related to their desired goal, lack of career guidance (e.g. first graduates) and limited access to structured career guidance services (Wells *et al.*, 2024). If the students got the chance to explore various job opportunities, they will definitely choose a right path at their initial stage without going to another undesired job. Another one is influence of parental career-related behavior. Parents act as primary social agents, shaping children's values, aspirations and career choices (Pattison *et al.*, 2022). Supportive parental behaviors whether informational, emotional, or instrumental, are helpful to enhance student's confidence, resilience, and perseverance in career pursuits (Timar-Anton *et al.*, 2023; F. Xiao *et al.*, 2025). Conversely, if parents are not supporting then it will lead the child to enter into undesired career pathway. Many students entering into any field based largely on parental guidance rather than intrinsic interest. These are the important factors behind career drift. The integration of career self-efficacy, dysfunctional career thinking, and parental career behavior into a single framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of the antecedents of employability skills. These employability skills extend beyond technical knowledge to encompass communication, teamwork, adaptability, leadership and critical thinking, all of which are increasingly demanded by employers across industries (Rakowska & de Juana-Espinosa. 2021; K. Li *et al.*, 2025).

Understanding how these psychological and social factors collectively shape employability is therefore essential for bridging the gap between education and employment. The significance of this study lies in its potential to benefit multiple stakeholders. For students, it builds self-awareness and competencies necessary for career success and also understanding the importance of achieving desired goal in order to avoid career drift in their future. For parents, it provides insights into how their behaviors support and also influence their child's career decisions. For policymakers and industry, it delivers empirical evidence to support curriculum,

education system reforms and changing in recruitment policies and ensuring alignment with skills and interest of the employee in that specified work. It will not only help the people by going into their passion and leading a meaningful, happy life but also the organizations by getting talented employees at minimal cost. Ultimately, this systematic review seeks to consolidate current knowledge, identify gaps, and provide a nuanced understanding of how personal, familial and institutional factors coverage to influence students' employability. By employing theoretical underpinnings such as SCCT, CIP theory, and human capital theory, this paper aims to contribute both academically and practically to the discourse on workforce development, educational reform, and youth empowerment. It is not only educational objective but also national imperative.

Literature Review

Defining Career Drift and Related Concepts:

"Career drift" in this paper is an umbrella term capturing

- Career plateau (low probability of hierarchical promotion),
- Skill-role mismatch (employee skills no longer aligned with tasks), and
- Career ambiguity (loss of perceived control over career trajectory). Classic career plateau theory frames plateaus as breaking the social exchange between employer and employee, producing decreased motivation and commitment. ([Academy of Management Journals] ^[3])

Career Plateau Effects on Satisfaction and Performance:

Meta-analytic and recent longitudinal studies show career plateaus correlate with lower job satisfaction, increased turnover intention, and poorer task performance. The mechanisms include reduced intrinsic motivation, perceived inequity, and decreased opportunities to apply or develop skills. Recent syntheses continue to find negative, medium-sized effects. ([ScienceDirect] ^[2])

The IT Sector Context: Skills, AI, and Turnover: IT firms face acute skills churn — both because technology changes and because tech employees have high external mobility. Sector reviews and recent literature identify career stagnation and skill mismatch as leading causes of turnover, which in turn harms productivity and increases hiring/training costs. The post-pandemic era and AI adoption add new dynamics: while some workers gain opportunities, others experience role compression or task displacement, amplifying career drift for some subgroups. ([ResearchGate] ^[4])

Employee Turnover in IT Sector: In the research article named "Understanding cause and effect of employee turnover in the IT sector: A comprehensive literature review", it deals with the perspective that underscores the importance of understanding the multifaceted influences that contribute to employees' decisions to leave or stay. The factors shaping these decisions are myriad, ranging from job-related stressors and job dissatisfaction to personal agency and economic considerations (Mellor, 2023; Vickers, 2006). Moreover, role stressors, such as role ambiguity and insufficient information on job performance expectations, have also been identified as significant contributors to turnover (Alhamad *et al.*, 2024; Tomar, 2019). It is essential to note that not only managerial factors lead to employee turnover, some due to personal circumstances or macroeconomic factors. Understanding the diverse sources of employee turnover is a fundamental step in addressing the issue. These sources can encompass a wide range of factors, from dissatisfaction with job roles and

compensation to a lack of work-life balance and organizational culture misalignment. The effects of employee turnover ripple through an organization, impacting its overall performance and competitiveness. High turnover can lead to decreased productivity, increased recruitment and training costs, and a loss of institutional knowledge.

There are a variety of elements that play a role in the decisions that individuals make regarding whether they should leave one organization in favor of another or whether they should leave an organization entirely. The decision-making process that leads individuals to leave their jobs is significantly influenced by the fact that the individual is dealing with stress that is directly related to their employment. This type of stress is more commonly referred to as “job stress.” A number of stressors, also referred to as factors, are the causes of stress at work. According to the findings of Firth *et al.* (2004), one of the reasons employees may decide to leave an IT organization is because they do not feel a strong commitment to the organization and unhappy in the jobs that they currently hold. These aspects bring into sharper relief the uniquely individual nature of the choice to quit smoking.

Personal Agency – Source of Employee Turnover: Personal agency encompasses a variety of concepts, including a sense of helplessness, a sense of where control lies, and personal control. The choice to give up something is an example of personal agency, and it involves the act of giving up something. According to Firth and colleagues (2004), the term “locus of control” is used to describe the extent to which individuals believe that the events that influence their lives are controlled by external factors such as chance and the actions of powerful others. For instance, some people have the misconception that their level of happiness is determined by factors from the outside.

Effects of Employee Turnover: Employee turnover indeed presents significant expenses from the IT organization’s perspective. Voluntary quits, where employees choose to leave, result in the loss of valuable human capital investments made by the organization (Fair, 1992). The subsequent process of replacing these departing employees involves a range of costs that can have a considerable financial impact on the organization.

Replacement costs encompass various aspects, including searching the external labor market to identify potential candidates who can fill the vacant position. This search process requires time, resources, and sometimes external recruitment agencies, incurring additional costs (Chaurasia *et al.*, 2017). Once potential candidates are identified, the IT organization must select the most suitable individual from among competing substitutes. This selection process involves further expenses, such as conducting interviews and assessments (Martinez-Munoz *et al.*, 2020).

Inducting the chosen substitute is another critical step in the replacement process. This involves familiarizing the new employee with the organization’s culture, policies, and procedures, which may require dedicated training programs. Both formal and informal training initiatives are necessary to ensure that the new hire reaches a performance level equivalent to that of the employee who quit (Jhon, 2000). These training efforts demand resources and time.

Additionally, there may be a transitional period during which the new employee is not yet operating at full efficiency. This can result in a temporary reduction in output or productivity. To mitigate the impact on output, organizations may need to resort to measures like paying overtime to existing employees to compensate for the productivity gap.

In summary, employee turnover imposes substantial costs on IT organizations. These costs encompass the search for replacements, the selection process, induction and training of new employees, and potential disruptions to output or productivity during the transition period (R. Karthikeyan & R. Mangaleswaran, 2019; Thorsten, 2016). Therefore, IT organizations have a strong financial incentive to implement strategies that minimize turnover and retain valuable talent. This career drift affects the organization because it creates increase in turnover rate that leads to loss for the organization.

Holland’s Theory of Career Choices: In the study of career choices among undergraduate Emirati students, Holland’s Theory of career choices (Holland, 1959) provides a framework for understanding the interplay between personal traits and environmental influences. This theory, which posits that career choices are expressions of one’s personality, is supported by findings from Blotnicky *et al.* (2018) and Kemboi *et al.* (2016), who emphasize the significant role of external factors like parental guidance and the home environment in shaping career interests and choices. Complementing this, the expectancy theory by Mitchell and Beach (1976) focuses on how individuals form expectations and how these influence behavior. This theory is particularly relevant in understanding the impact of teachers and educational institutions, as highlighted in the research by Theresa (2015) and Blotnicky *et al.* (2018) in shaping students’ career expectations. Furthermore, the extension of the expectancy theory by Baliyan and Baliyan (2016) to include social and economic factors such as job opportunities and income levels, as explored in studies by Hartmann *et al.* (2021) and Morgan *et al.* (2015), underscores the influence of these factors in career decision-making. Lastly, the significance of university programs in shaping career preferences is evidenced in the research by Wang and Wanberg (2017) and Kumara *et al.* (2019), aligning with the emphasis on the role of educational pathways. This integrated approach, combining Holland’s theory and the Expectancy theory with empirical evidence, provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors influencing career choices among Emirati students. This implies that your interest only doesn’t decide your career, there are many factors some directly and others indirectly affect or influence your decisions about your career.

Impact of career drift and solutions to avoid it in IT sector:

It leads to increase in turnover, that will amounts to waste of money and time for recruitment, selection and training processes and decrease in overall productivity of the organization. It creates dissatisfaction to the employees without going to their desired career path, after going to desired career path they felt like living a meaningful and satisfied life. Career drift phenomenon is not an individual problem; it is a social problem, it should be solved by each and every individual. In their single decision, it all depends. If each individual choose their career path wisely, they will be more creative and actively participating or facing challenges and also develop that field, if all sector/department grows effectively, it will leads to potential growth of our nation.

Review of Literature

Article: Factors influencing career adaptation: the positive effects of mastery goal orientation, social support, and vocational decision self-efficacy.

Authors: Baiyan Du, Jingcheng Wang, Yuzhe Qian, Jun cheng.

Article: Exploring the factors affecting career choices of

undergraduate emirati students.

Authors: Laila Mohebi and Solomon Arulraj David.

Article: The role of Future works self as moderator between career anxiety and career decision-making difficulty.

Authors: Dewa Gede Nata Raditya, Rose Mini Agoes Salim, Faculty of psychology, university of Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia.

Methodology

In this research, both primary and secondary data are collected. Primary data is collected by survey questionnaire and directly asking questions from IT working employees. Secondary data is collected by reading and analyzing many research articles globally. Then, I analyzed those data in overall and adding my personal opinions and findings in this research paper.

Research Instrument

The following is the survey questionnaire is used to collect primary data:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSezZ2iY5WNPHoVKUs-q8npeQYhogCNJgx66QoISSFapQ9pTHA/viewform?usp=header>

I also directly collect data by interacting with IT working employees in my PG, Lakshmi Narayan girls PG located in taramani, Chennai. For secondary data, as mentioned earlier it was collected from various research articles and some from online sources and some from social media.

Results

According to the responses received by me, it is find out that most of the career drift happens to employees are under graduated (50%). It is evident that 33.3% people' decisions about their career are influenced by family expectations, job security, salary potential and availability of jobs. In my findings, the major reasons contributed to career drift are burnout/stress, better opportunities elsewhere, financial reasons, lack of career growth, personal reasons (health, family etc...). In rating scale, 33.3% of employees agreed that their career has drifted from where they initially intended. 66.7% of the sample employees agreed that they are uncertain about their current career direction. 50% of the sample employees want to get back their original career path that is their desired career goal. 33.4% of the employees in the sample not satisfied with the current career and 66.6% of people are satisfied with the current career. 50% of the employees agreed that they regret leaving their original career. 67% of employees are dissatisfied with their current career, in that 16.7% are very dissatisfied. 50% of the sample employees told that, if there is a chance they would restart their career. 33.4% of the sample employees are planning to change their career in the next 1-2 years.

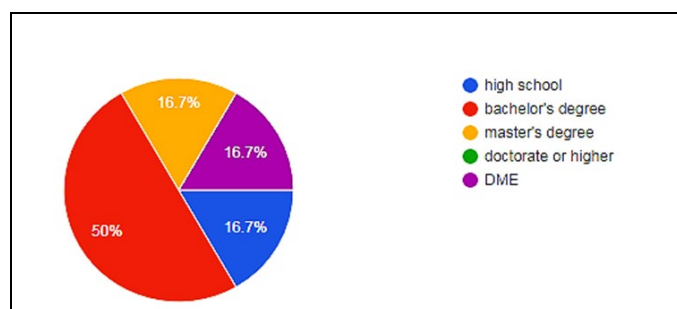


Fig 1: Educational qualification of employees who experience career

drift

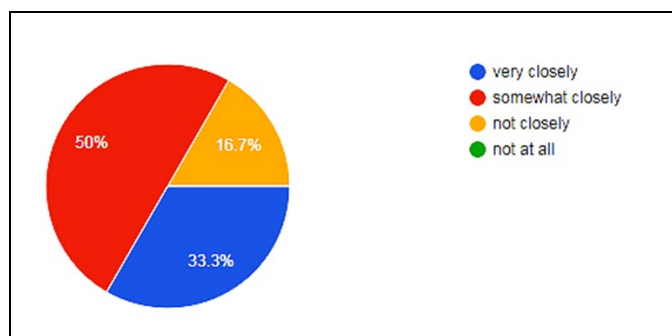


Fig 2: Closeness of current job align with original career goal

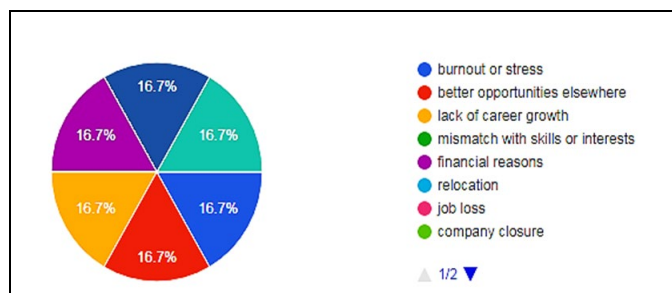


Fig 3: Reasons contributing to career drift

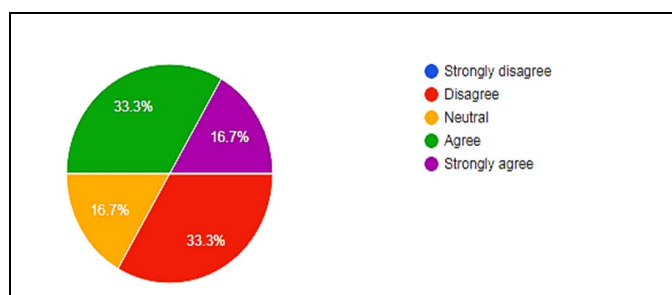


Fig 4: People feel their career has drifted where they initially intended

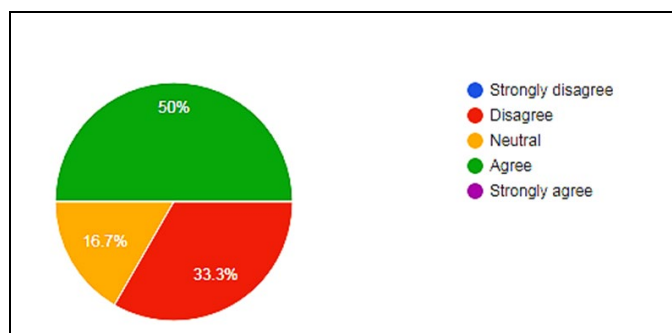


Fig 5: Satisfaction level of the employees from the current job

Here, 50% of the respondents agreed that they are not satisfied with their current job role. 16.7% of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed. Many people fear about the future as we all AI rapidly grows and replacing all so they want to write any governments exams and want to enter into government jobs for job security. So they quit their jobs and preparing for government exams. These indicate that technology advancements are good only but excess use of technology sometimes creates unpredictable bad events. To avoid this, we have to use our brain instead of using AI. We have to be creative and develop new skills and gain more knowledge.

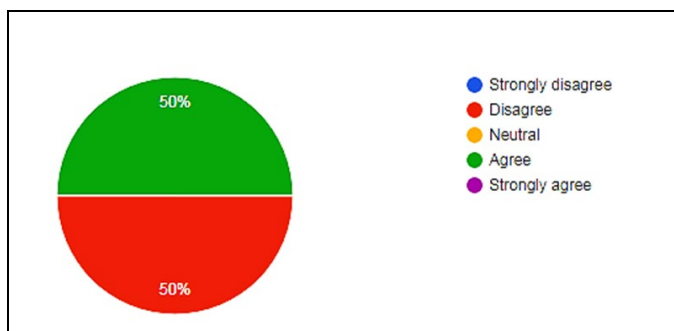


Fig 6: Employees regret leaving their original career

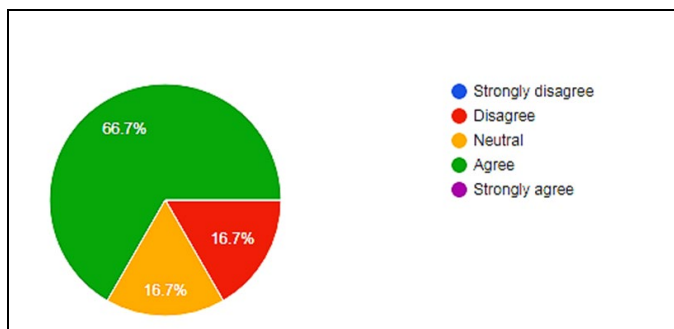


Fig 7: Uncertainty about their current career direction

Discussions

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-actualization is the highest personal aspirational human need in the hierarchy. It represents where one's potential is fully realized after more basic needs, such as for the body and the ego, have been fulfilled. In that hierarchy, bottom level contains basic needs in the organization (physiological needs, safety and security), mid-level contains psychological needs (love and belongings, self-esteem), and finally in the top level self-fulfillment needs (self-actualization). This self-fulfillment need is important in employee retention.

From the school and college level, formal education is important. Educational institutions should foster students' confidence in their career paths, while parents should be engaged as active partners in career guidance. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts and test interventions that enhance both internal (self-efficacy) and external (parental) factors. Understanding the synergy between these variables is vital in preparing a skilled, confident and job-ready employability workforce. We have to give education to students regarding career opportunities which are available and methods to approach it. Because, career affects human's happiness in their life as a whole. Therefore, the accuracy of career selection and decision making becomes a prominent point in the journey of human life.

After giving proper career guidance also people faced some difficulties in their work due to rapid development of technology. As technology develops day-to-day, change happens every day, leads to the requirement or demand of new variety of skills. Students after graduation enter into job and continue their career. If they are really interest in that field they had entered, definitely they would be happy even getting low salary. But, if their motive is towards earning money only, they will work only for money, not contributing new developments in that field. For instance, if a person is very interested in plants, he should have to become a botanist not a dentist or any other occupation which is too far from this field. If they entered into any field they feel happy at the initial stage and accept it, but after some years, they feel

unmotivated, dissatisfied and irritated by doing repetitive tasks without any interest. They start to think between the lines, either desired career goal or currently working sector.

As technology changes every day, it is difficult for college students to get employment in their desired field, I agreed to this. It is not only an individual problem but a social problem. According to a survey conducted by MyCOS (2022) on college graduates from 2017 to 2021 in china, after graduation the turnover rate has been consistently high within 6 months. In that survey, 43% of the respondents left their jobs due to dissatisfaction with salary, benefits and treatment, 34% of them left due to no satisfaction with the personal development opportunities in their jobs, 24% of the respondents left due to high job demands and significant work pressure (MyCOS, 2022). The emphasis is that 34% of employees left due to dissatisfaction in the personal development opportunities. It indicates that they entered into work without any interest and doing repeated tasks/jobs creates burnout/stress in the employees, so they left their work. If they choose their job with personal interest, they satisfied with more happiness even at low salary.

Suggestions

In my sample, the respondents also give advice to avoid career drift, they told that "success takes time so keep your desired goal in your soul and keep moving towards it and never lose hope, never forget to keep your smile forever" and "be financially independent" and "be focus on what you do". 83.3% of the respondents agreed that if they choose their desired career strongly without hearing anyone they would be absolutely a different person than now they are. So, it is your career, you have to decide it and also you have to make proper decision by exploring all the job opportunities which is available in your desired career goal and then decide on your own.

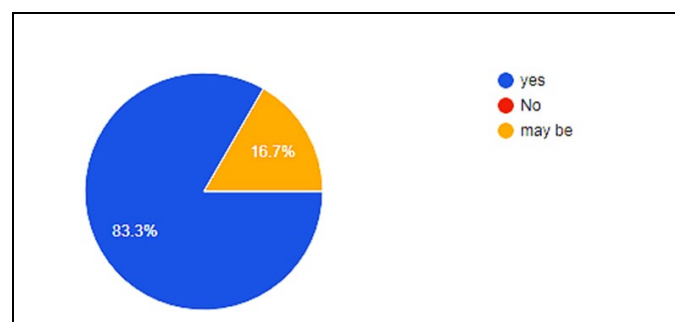


Fig 8: Want to go back their desired career

Conclusion

Here, I want to highlight the butterfly effect in this conclusion. The butterfly effect is a core concept of chaos theory describing how a tiny change in the initial conditions of a complex system can lead to large, unpredictable, and disproportionate consequences later on. It is coined by mathematician Edward Lorenz, the metaphor illustrates that a butterfly's wing flap in one part of the world could, overtime, theoretically trigger a tornado elsewhere. Similarly little drops of water makes a mighty ocean, little changes in career decision making process of each individual reflects potential growth of whole nation. Many choices are there, choose one wisely and become the master of your career. There are many factors influence your decision, may be your parents, may be your friends, society but it is your life, your choice and YOUR career. Choose your own way and shine like a star. It

is in people' hands to avoid career drift because it not only affects individual but also organization and the whole society.

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