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# STUDYING PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS



Professional success is a goal that is often aspired towards. It has been described as everything from a state of mind, to a myth. Like any concept that is so widely debated, it has undergone psychological and anthropological investigations. One such investigation forms the basis of this edition of #r4o.

As part of a client engagement, we tested a cognitive psychology based success framework. The purpose of this framework was to be able to break professional success down into its basic elements.

*The aim of our research was to understand whether this framework stands true for working professionals: in their everyday lives, how do they define and understand success?*

We designed a short quantitative survey, with questions addressing each component of the professional success framework. Our 57 respondents were spread across 5 geographies, with the Indian subcontinent being most represented (61%). The age distribution was skewed in favour of millennials in the workforce (73%).

Building from the results of this survey, we conducted in-depth ethnographic interviews with a smaller sample. Through open-ended questions, we led conversations around the experience of professional success - to arrive at its multiple meanings.

*Our combination of methods helped identify how different components of success resonated with people, and furthermore, understand how they are experienced in everyday life.*

#RESEARCH4  
OUTCOMES

VOLUME 8

## Highlights

- 1 How to approach professional success as a concept
- 2 The constitutive components of professional success
- 3 Professional success articulated across experience levels

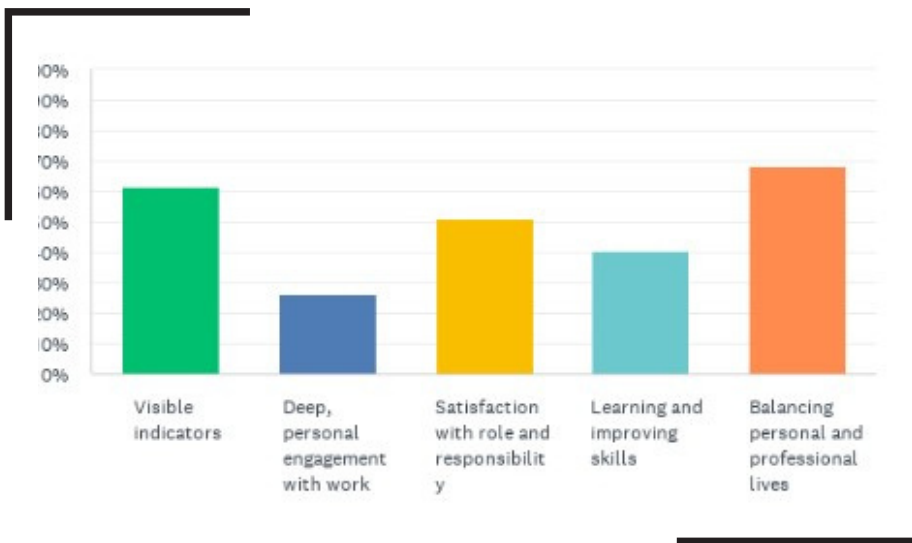
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# WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS MADE OF?

We presented our respondents with definitions of professional success, and asked them to choose the ones that they most resonated with.

**The balance between personal and professional success emerged as the most meaningful definition, while visible indicators (such as titles, salary brackets) were the second-most chosen.**

We noticed a gender difference, in line with existing research on core life goals, which finds women placing less importance on power-related goals such as high-level positions. **More men than women (69% vs 54%) reported that visible indicators captured their definition of professional success.**



In terms of the skills that are crucial to achieving success, our research found that **cognitive flexibility (i.e. the ability to adapt to different contexts, and be open to new learnings and perspectives)** was rated the most important as well as the most helpful to professional success.

While this gives us a broad overview of what success is associated with, we turn to the ethnographic interview for more insight into the lived experience of professional success.

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# THE MANY MEANINGS OF PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

## I. freedom

Apart from standard metrics [such as meeting the demands of your job, rising through ranks/salary brackets], *success was defined as the freedom to do what one aims to do at work, and also the freedom to step away from work when need be.* "My actual life lies outside of work, no matter how much I love what I do", observed an interviewee with more than 20 years of work experience.

Early-career interviewees, specifically, acknowledged that work does take up much more of their lives than it should, but said that it is by design – that *this will help them move forward, after which they will have the freedom to prioritise as they please.*

## II. strong benchmarks

Working with other people, both in order to learn what to be as well as what not to be, was emphasized. *"It pushes you to do better, not in a toxic competitive way...but being around people who are constantly holding themselves to a higher bar, helps."*, said a Gen Z interviewee two years into their career. Having a network of people who are partners in your growth emerged as a significant aspect of one's professional success.

## III. openness

*"Having a point of view is a must, but it is equally important to be open to other points of view"*, said a mid-career millennial, when looking back at their trajectory at work. At the start of one's career, this openness could involve expanding one's own horizons. Later on in one's career, however, it could manifest itself in the agility and adaptability required to occupy leadership positions.

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# THE MANY MEANINGS OF PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

## IV. balance

Adapting to the demands of work and matching it with one's own life stage emerged as a crucial practice in how people balance the personal with the professional. *"At the end of the day, we work in order to be able to put time back at home and into the things we love", noted one interviewee.*

Later-career participants mentioned that this *balance also depends strongly on how engaging and fulfilling your work is.* As for shifting priorities with age and responsibilities, they pointed out that *organisations should provide avenues to ensure an easier balance between work and home.*

## V. reflexivity

One interviewee summarised this as needing to have "constant dialogue on whether your goals are relevant", and *"keep checking in on the work you are doing and why you are doing it".*

People make meaning out of their experiences of success in vastly different ways, prioritising different elements of it based on their subjective circumstances. Ultimately, perhaps, success is about feeling fulfilled within one's context, whatever that context may be.

Our insights and information stem from interdisciplinary and contextual research. Want to know more about our work? [visit us at www.lagomworks.com](http://www.lagomworks.com) or mail [connect@lagomworks.com](mailto:connect@lagomworks.com)

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