

# Trust at work – described by young professionals in the early stages of their careers

The early stages of careers

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This case study explores trust at work, described by young professionals in the early stages of their careers. In this article, trust is approached as the study participants' experiences of interpersonal trust. More specifically, it refers to relationships between colleagues, among individuals or at group level (Ma *et al.*, 2019). Supervisors or managers did not take part in this study. The research question was “What do young professionals tell about trust and its importance at work?”

**Design/methodology/approach** – The empirical study consists of qualitative data, focus group (5) interviews ( $n = 20$ ) of young professionals who are in the early stages of their careers (1–3 years after graduation). The study is contextualized in Finland, in Helsinki metropolitan area, in three social and healthcare workplaces and two information technology (IT) organizations. Both public and private sectors are represented. The data were analysed by theory-based content analysis.

**Findings** – According to the study results, descriptions of trust and its importance at work can be placed in three main categories. First, trust is an important element in improving young professionals' adaptation into the working community. Second, trust strengthens young professionals' professionalism and professional development at work. Third, trust at work highlights ethical issues and their significance in workplace relationships. Practical implications and limitations are also discussed.

**Research limitations/implications** – Due to the nature of this study, the research results should be viewed critically. The results can be seen as one suggestion to structure and increase understanding of trust in working life, from the perspective of young professionals in the early stages of their careers. As all research, the studies included in this review had several limitations that need to be taken into account. First, one of them is the size of the data, also in this study. Second, although literature has been searched carefully, there is always a chance of better literature existing for discussion on trust at work from young professionals' points of view, even though there is not a lot available on this specific topic. Nonetheless, literature of this study includes the most relevant classics of trust research. Third, the method has its own limits because it is based on focus group interviews, not interviews of individuals. On the other hand, it offered time for the team to reflect on trust in their own team.

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Still, this study offers one option for discussion of trust in work relationships. Additionally, it was noteworthy that the subjects were at the beginning of their careers, joining a new working community. They were in the early stages of building a professional identity, seeking confirmation of their skills and position in the working community. Thus, we recognize that this may have contributed to the collection of research data, which was a focus group interview. Few participants in the interview wanted to strongly point out the factors related to distrust, even if they had appeared at work. The authors recognize that exploring trust requires trust and acknowledge it. Data have been collected before the COVID-19 pandemic (see, e.g. van Zoonen *et al.*, 2021).

**Practical implications** – This study implies that trust at work should focus on discussing young professionals' thoughts, expectations, feelings and experiences of trust at work as part of transitioning from graduation into working life or in early stages of their careers. Trust should not only be discussed in dyadic discussions between young professionals and supervisors but also as part of team discussions. The authors' suggestion is that trust should be in the core of team discussions, not just as part of teams' social and emotional dimensions of their functionality and capacity. Courage and skills to take part in such discussions is needed from all parties. Especially leaders have to have the ability to create a trusting environment to talk about trust. In particular, the importance of peers in trust and their importance at work should be taken into account. By understanding young professionals' point of view, we can prevent job changes or dissatisfaction at work too. The purpose of this study was to contribute to this line of research on trust at work. The trust resource contributes to and promotes the realization of participation in working life.

**Social implications** – The trust resource contributes to and promotes the realization of participation in working life. Leaders and coworkers can learn about trust as a phenomenon, while developing more emotionally sustainable working environments for young professionals. Trust should be seen as a skill or competence to improve various positive functional dimensions at work.

**Originality/value** – The results demonstrate that it is crucial to ensure emotional sustainability at work, and a positive feeling of belonging at work supports young professionals by developing a trusting work environment. It strengthens their engagement in a new work.

**Keywords** Young professionals, Trust at work, Social and healthcare and IT, Graduate employability

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Rapidly changing working life emphasizes the importance of predictability and continuity at work and its relationships. Even though several studies have demonstrated the central role of trust at work, no studies concern trust at work in the early stages of young professionals' careers. Trusting work environment is particularly important for young professionals because new work with new social ties between colleagues has an effect on work performance, quality of work outcomes and well-being at work. Trusting relationships contribute to psychological safety (Edmondson and Zhike, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to support young professionals' workplaces' trusting relationships and communication (Thomas *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, evidence shows that positive feelings have a connection to what people think about their work (Thoresen *et al.*, 2003). At least they make cooperation more fruitful.

In general, trust in national institutions has declined over the past two years in Europe (Eurofound, 2022). Moreover, in surveys of "Standard Eurobarometer 2022–Summer 2022" many perspectives study trust even though it was not directly asked. The survey includes questions on economic and financial situation, COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine and their impacts on citizens' opinions. Even though they were not direct questions about trust in general, these questions can be seen as important indicators of citizens' state of mind as regards trustworthiness or untrustworthiness of policymakers and their ability to solve problems. However, in general at the European Union (EU) level, the EU citizens' trust towards the EU has risen. The results indicate that every third citizen trusts their national governments. (Standard Eurobarometer Survey, 2022).

However, cultures differ as regards people's trust towards institutions and organizations; in Finland, the level of trust is quite high. For example, in the government programme for "building a socially sustainable society", trust across different sectors is one of its main elements. In other words, trust can be seen as an important value in Finnish society. Another example of trust in Finnish society is that approximately 85% of Finnish parents trust their

children's school (Sahlberg and Walker, 2019). Yet, the most trusted institution in Finland is police. In addition, many civil protection services are also seen as reliable institutions by citizens (firefighting, emergency and rescue services or the Border Guard) but police are at the top of the list (Vuorensyrjä and Rauta, 2020). Trust towards the judiciary is lower than towards police. According to Bäck and Kestilä-Kekkonen (2019) "*higher education, good health and optimism about the future and trust in implementing institutions were all significant factors in estimating the level of generalized trust in Finland*".

According to Young Professional Attraction Index, YPAI (2019), young professionals appreciate the diversity of work tasks, corporate responsibility, transparency, humanity and equal treatment of employees. In addition, young professionals identify work as an important source of well-being, social capital and economic wealth (Honkatukia and Lähde, 2020). Nonetheless, reality at work can be different. For example, young professionals under the age of 30 in Finland typically work in atypical employment relationships, such as having "zero hour contracts" or temporary work (Järvensivu *et al.*, 2014). A young graduate's experience of working life, its interpersonal professional relationships and interactions is a significant starting point for their entire future career. Young professionals' average age to start to work in Finland is approximately 21 years (Katainen, 2020).

In Finnish working life, the challenge is the feeling of being rushed and working in free time. Hurry is more common in Finland than in other EU countries, especially in the female-dominated public sector and social sector (Sutela, 2020). According to Eurostat (2020), almost one in four Finnish employees reported that they had received more than one contact regarding work matters that required them to react in their free time. When comparing all the employed people in EU27 countries, the share of those who always or often work in a hurry is only slightly higher in Finland (40%) than the EU average (36%). In this comparison, Finland ranks roughly in the middle (Eurostat, 2020). However, internationally comparative research results should be approached with caution, as cultural factors, familiarity with the concepts and translation issues can affect the differences between the answers of different countries.

Furthermore, on the Finnish labour market some young persons who have seen no demand for their expertise have moved abroad (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2015, p. 9). As regards new professionals at work, working life does not appear to be the same for different generations (Järvensivu, 2014). For instance, different generations (the baby boomers, welfare generation, recession generation, Y generation, digital natives and millennials) work in parallel. The youngest, i.e. generation Z, is in the process of entering into working life.

In other words, trust in working life can be viewed from many different perspectives. Trust manifests itself as a phenomenon between individuals or within a group, team or wider community or at the level of a larger organization (Lewicki and Brinsfield, 2017; Fulmer and Gelfand, 2012), but also as part of the social system and operating culture (Koivumäki, 2008). In working life, trust is connected to relationships at interpersonal or systematic level in the organization, but also to employee self-confidence (Govier, 1993) or professional agency (Smith, 2012). Professional agency is defined in the research literature as a positive, forward-looking and goal-oriented activity and trust in the work organization (Smith, 2012). According to Derks *et al.* (2014), the ability to trust other people is a prerequisite for young adult's developmental stage. This is also critical in studying trust in working life from young professionals' perspectives. After all, a safe, supportive and trusting work environment is crucial and meaningful especially to new professionals. To ensure more emotionally sustainable working life for future generations, we have to explore working life's social phenomena and requirements, such like trust. The present study constitutes a contribution to the area of trust at work, as regards young professionals who are in the early stages of their careers. The research question is "What do young professionals tell about trust and its importance at work?"

*Literature review*

Conceptually, trust is a multidisciplinary phenomenon which does not have only one, generally accepted definition (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). Trust is approached in different ways, for example, the philosophical approach emphasizes trust as an attitude and value, whereas in sociology, the interest in trust lies in communities, groups or in the socialization process. On the contrary, in psychology, the discourse of trust is related to individual's personality (Erikson, 1950). Traditionally, trust has been viewed as part of social capital (e.g. Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 1993, 2000) or based on people's mutual knowledge and shared values (Luhmann, 1979). Trust has its "multilevel" nature (Fulmer and Dirks, 2018).

Trust manifests itself as a cognition-based and affect-based interaction (McAllister, 1995). Trust is a dynamic and fragile phenomenon, as it requires the ability to demonstrate its vulnerability and withstand disappointments (Baier, 1986). Trust is based on expertise, i.e. "given trust" (Harré, 1999). On the other hand, "earned trust" (Harré, 1999) can be achieved through successful interaction, including people's high level of competence (professionalism). Moreover, trust can also be seen as a cognitive choice and a conscious decision (Li, 2012). Trust is not just a matter of "all or nothing", but an individual can trust others in varying degrees and in different situations. Trust is also researched as social trust (e.g. Justwana *et al.*, 2018) and there is a link between trust and power (Möllering, 2019). The two perspectives of trust are, first of all, affective trust which is based on interpersonal dynamics. It is emotional; feelings of becoming understood or believing in others' good will. In contrast, cognitive trust is based on people's predictability and competence (Dinh *et al.*, 2021).

In the context of working life, trust is often seen as a resource for the individual, the group and the organization, something that is reciprocally built in human relationships (Savolainen and Ikonen, 2016). Benefits of paying attention to experiences of trust at work include prevention of work-related stress (Koivumäki, 2008) or unfairness at work (Bingham, 2016). In addition, by understanding trust's repairing function on macro-level (Bachmann *et al.*, 2015) or trust in HR practices (Kähkönen *et al.*, 2021), and also from cultural point of views (Mansour and Zaheer, 2021), can improve and strengthen the feeling of trust at work. However, in the worst case, breach of trust has consequences not only for the individual employee, but for the entire organization (Lewicki and Brinsfield, 2017). According to Nooteboom (2001) in Liff and Wahlström (2017), *thin trust* is connected to macro level, while *thick trust* exists on micro level (personal) and manifests itself in specific relations. In other words, thick trust is based on familiarity, while thin trust is based on specific individuals or institutions. In this study, interpersonal trust between co-workers is seen as it appears in the context of thin trust. Moreover, according to Nooteboom (2001), experience and process-based trust are connected to each other, when experience is based on an interaction process. Interaction affects perceived goals, norms, values and feelings of friendship, loyalty, rivalry, animosity and thereby can build trust or cause suspicion.

The field of trust in current research is wide (e.g. *Journal of Trust Research*). Trust has been researched in multiple contexts, including investigating verbal responses to breaches of trust (Bagdasarov *et al.*, 2019), transparency at work (Tomlinson and Schnackenberg, 2022) or trust in brain function (Zak, 2017). Furthermore, it has been studied in both virtual (Dinh *et al.*, 2021) and global teams (Mansour and Zaheer, 2021) and in health professionals' trust in digital technology (Hoxha *et al.*, 2021) or understanding employee trust in artificial intelligence at work (Fulmer *et al.*, 2022).

Social and healthcare sectors and the IT sector suffer from lack of engaged employees and high turnover rates. In this article, we argue that trust can be one answer to develop emotionally sustainable working environments for young professionals, so that it is easier for them to engage, to be involved and have a feeling of being welcomed in their new job. It is also financially relevant to organizations and supervisors, not only in recruitment processes. Studying trust is crucial and needed—not only at personal, but also at organizational level. The theoretical basis of this study is to look at trust in working life in bilateral relations, in the context of *interpersonal trust*.

### *Interpersonal trust at work*

The majority of trust studies, according to [Ma et al. \(2019\)](#), focus on people's level of trust between them (*interpersonal trust*) and "one-way trust" (*unidirectional trust*). These studies are focused on trust of individuals and their points of views, without considering the complexity or dynamics of trust. A one-way trust study examines trust in only one perspective, at different levels of hierarchy; (1) at the higher level of hierarchy (e.g. trust of subordinates in a supervisor) (2) at the lower level of hierarchy (e.g. trust of supervisors in subordinates), or (3) at the same level of hierarchy (e.g. trust of employees in each other). Moreover, when talking about trust at work as interpersonal trust, it can be seen as an employee's experience, thought, emotion or attitude of trust in relation to other people, such as colleagues, a supervisor or the whole organization. Other trust studies usually examine the trend of two-way trust (*bidirectional trust*). This promotes research on complex models of trust and the development of trust over time (e.g. long term studies). However, it is difficult to study trust in two directions, as it is difficult to build a functioning study design in practice ([Ma et al., 2019](#)). For this reason, this study also focuses on interpersonal trust (unidirectional trust), highlighting trust in *one-on-one* relationships between employees ([Ma et al., 2019](#)).

This article focuses on interpersonal trust, describing trusting or non-trusting relationships between peers from young professionals' point of view. This article also focuses on the participants' understanding and description of interpersonal trust and its meaning for their working life experience in the early stages of career. Trust can be an emotional or a cognitive experience or attitude, but as [Ma et al. \(2019\)](#) classify it, this study focuses on the same level of hierarchy (e.g. trust of employees in each other). In other words, relationships between a trustor (who trust others) and a trustee (who is being trusted). Supervisors are excluded from this study.

### *Trust and distrust in everyday work practices*

According to [Kramer \(1999\)](#), trust in organizations can manifest itself as (1) an individual phenomenon (character trait), i.e. people's tendency to trust or distrust, (2) generated by a history of human interaction, or (3) reputation-based, where trust-related hearsay and beliefs are generated. Perception of human reliability is relevant as well. Trust can also be (4) class-based or (5) role-based, in which case a person's role in the organization, for example, affects the reliability assessments of others about them. Trust can also be (6) rule-based. However, trust does not only have positive effects in all situations, as The reverse can be true in presence of a strong collective identity, if the working community is, for example, clearly divided into "us and them" ([Raatikainen, 2011](#)).

A trusting work environment promotes collaboration and interaction; thus, it can be an uncomplicated, safe and satisfying place to work. People have experiences of appreciation. Trust promotes utilization of human skills, which in turn increases employee motivation ([Savolainen and Ikonen, 2016](#)). In a trusting working community, even difficult issues can be discussed without having to fear negative consequences. There is psychological safety and people can ask each other for help and support without fear. They can ask questions and present ideas, but also raise concerns, grievances and doubts without being ridiculed. When psychological safety prevails, it is safe to make mistakes. It generates sincerity, openness and mutual respect ([Edmondson, 1999, 2018](#)). Psychological safety and trust are linked ([Edmondson and Zhike, 2014](#)).

In addition, [Fagley and Adler \(2012\)](#) describe that perceived appreciation increases employees' self-esteem and willingness to help others. In a trusting relationship, the starting point for work is optimistic and hopeful, rather than expecting the worst, suspecting or fearing failures. In working communities where people trust each other, collective challenges

can be solved more quickly (Justwana *et al.*, 2018; Ostrom, 2003). For example, team members who trust one another can better communicate and coordinate behaviours such as familiarity, openness and reliability (Dinh *et al.*, 2021).

On the contrary, distrust between people in everyday work practices can appear for an individual employee as constant turnover of colleagues or supervisors, as well as in many changes in relationships or work processes. Distrust between people increases isolation, hostility, insecurity and contempt (Troman, 2000). Furthermore, without awareness of trusting relationships at work it can be difficult to feel intimacy, sense of belonging, security and acceptance and to provide support.

According to research, when employees experience trust, they also feel that they are an integral part of the organization (Lau *et al.*, 2014). It has also been shown that high levels of trust towards an employee are usually linked to high levels of responsibility and involvement in the job. This is because employees feel that they must constantly maintain their professionalism and failure is not allowed. When exhausted, it is more challenging to experience trust (Baer *et al.*, 2014, pp. 1639, 1652). According to Welander *et al.* (2017), public sector employers should refine their staffing strategies and practices in order to strengthen trust and create a more positive work environment.

In this regard, also gender equality needs to be noticed when talking about trust at work. According to Mewes (2014), gender equality has a positive effect on perceived trust. Additionally, trust and the mechanisms of trust are different across the world (Mansour and Zaheer, 2021). The quality of relationships between co-workers at work is essential.

#### *Benefits of trust at work*

Fagley and Adler (2012) propose that perceived appreciation increases employees' perception of being valued and their willingness to help others. In this regard, development of trust is promoted, for example, by the employee's flexibility in terms of working hours. Furthermore, trust facilitates expressing opinions to others (Govier, 1993) which can, at best, lead to innovations (e.g. Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagińska, 2019).

The work team can contribute to supporting or destabilizing this. For example, according to Rogers (1980), groups can at best make a person thrive or cause passivity in an individual (Rogers, 1980, p. 23). However, if the employees are stressed, or the work environment (and working conditions and resources) are undersized, employees may feel to have been left alone. For example, Astvik *et al.* (2014) highlight situations where resources do not meet organizational goals or quality standards, but, for example, social workers are nonetheless forced to perform as if they were. As a result, either they endanger their own health, or the quality of services is at stake. A breach of trust can have worrying consequences for both the individual and the organization as a whole (Lewicki and Brinsfield, 2017). For that reason, the benefits of trust are important to notice.

Trust at work has been widely studied but trust studies in the social and healthcare and IT sectors and young professionals are few. It is important to study this topic to better understand trust at work from young professionals' points of view. This study provides a more focused perspective on the early stages of career, with an aim to understand this topic more in depth.

#### *Methodology and implementation*

The aim of the study was to examine trust and its significance at work in the early stages of career of young professionals who are also recent graduates. The research question was "What do young professionals tell about trust and its importance at work?"

### *Participants and data collection*

Data were collected from three social and healthcare sector organizations, both private and public and two large global IT companies. A total of twenty ( $n = 20$ ) recent graduates (1–3 years ago) and young professionals participated in the study. As detailed above, we conducted semi-structured focus group interviews (Krueger and Casey, 2009). In this case study (Yin, 2012), we chose interviews as methodology for data collection because we wanted to encourage young professionals to reflexivity (Cassell *et al.*, 2020). The semi-structured approach allows more questions to be asked, if needed, during the interview (Robson and McCartan, 2011). Methodologically considered, semi-structured interviews ensured that the contents of the interviews in all groups were as similar as possible and even open dialogue was allowed. We focused on trust but the interviews also included topics such as job satisfaction, encouraging atmosphere and the importance of feedback, teamwork and values at work. These themes were part of a broader research project (called Kapu project). The question asked was the same in every theme of this interview's themes (see Appendix Table A1). During the interview, we provided space and time for unstructured discussion on trust at work in general. We decided not to define trust, because we wanted to give the participants a possibility to define and explore what it is and what its meaning is, at work in the early stages of career.

An HR specialist selected the participants, based on their years at work, from each organization. Participation was voluntary. Organizations were committed to the project, whose aim was to study enjoyment at work. This study was part of the Kapu project.

The role of the interviewers was to capture the themes of trust that were raised and to ask more specific questions (Robson and McCartan, 2011), to achieve an understanding of the meaning of trust at work for young professionals. This article only deals with data related to trust at work. Four authors of this article collected the data, and an external service provider transcribed the data verbatim. Data consist of 135 pages and were collected by researcher triangulation (Robson and McCartan, 2011). In our study, it meant that all the authors participated in gathering relevant literature and four of them collected the data. In every stage of the study, we followed the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity and our organization's guidelines for good practice (TENK).

### *Data analysis*

The data was analysed is of the data with theory-based content analysis (Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Robson and McCartan, 2011) meaning that the analysis alternated between trust researchers' perceptions of trust and its various components (e.g. Baier, 1986; Blomqvist and Cook, 2018; Govier, 1993; Luhmann, 1979; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Troman, 2000). In other words, the approach was abductive (Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Robson and McCartan, 2011). The data was also analysed from the content analysis perspective (Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Miles and Huberman, 1994), i.e. the analysis was a mix of theory-based content analysis and content analysis.

More detailed analysis units emerged from the data, in connection to literature. One researcher analysed the data on the basis of previous notions on trust, based on literature. Analysis of the data followed ethical research principles and took into account the general guidelines of the Research Ethics Advisory Board (TENK, 2019). Research permits were obtained from all participating organizations, and they were informed of the research in an appropriate manner. Participation in the study was voluntary. In more detail, the data in the study were initially classified as research results under the guidance of research questions through reduction, clustering and abstraction (Cohen *et al.*, 2011).

The analysis components were based on classic theories and definitions of trust (literature) and on the researchers' preliminary understanding of trust (an Appendix Table A2). The analysis components were not exclusively based on only one aspect or theory,

but a combination of them. This is justified by trust being a complex phenomenon where its elements (shared values, feelings, situations) are linked to each other. Also, theorists define trust somewhat differently, although similarities exist. One clear difference in focuses is based on their academic background (psychology, philosophy or sociology). This study combines these three perspectives in its data analysis: previous theoretical literature and its core elements have developed the researchers' preliminary understanding of the topic which has then helped in determining the components (analysis units) for the data analysis.

The first phase of the analysis grouped and reduced the interviews' content about the elements of trust (components) such as *what and how participants talked about trust, in what situations it is involved and how, what kind of feelings and other factors were brought up in the descriptions of the meaning of trust at work*. This first step (reduction) exposed the essential elements of the data, in terms of the research question. According to the first phase of the analysis, a subcategory was created (Table 1.). The reduced expressions were classified into seventy (70) subcategories. Secondly, after the first phase, headline-level summaries of the data were designed (clustering). The total number of main categories was fifteen (15). In the final step of the analysis (abstraction), relevant information was condensed into three main categories (Table 1.) as results.

Initially, the reliability of results was ensured by presenting the results in several seminars, in order to obtain feedback and foster interaction with a wider audience, for example with the participants' organizations and with academic audience in one academic conference.

### Results

The results are presented as three main results. Based on the analysis, the interviewees reported that trust and its importance can be divided into three main categories: (1) Trust is

| Example  | Subcategory   | Main category   |
|--|---|---|
| <i>A co-worker helps, as long as you manage to relieve pressure and tell about your feelings, it helps for coping (social)</i>                               | Transparency and mutual support                                       | Trust as an important element to improve young professionals' adaptation to working community |
| <i>You have to be trusted too — you have to be a good example on that (IT)</i>   | Reciprocity and shared responsibility                                 |   |
| <i>It is important that everyone feels safe in the workplace, and then customers are safe too (health)</i>   | Psychological safety  |   |
| <i>When people get a task that they might feel scared of at first, but then when they get through it, they really shine (health)</i>                         | Responding to professional expectations and making competence visible | Trust as a key factor in strengthening professionalism  |
| <i>Clients can have a lot of expectations for us. There need to be balance between what you do or not to do, and how you limit that work (social sector)</i> | Constant turnover of co-workers                                       |   |
| <i>The employment relationship ends at the turn of the year and is a bit open now, whether and how you continue (social sector)</i>                          |   |   |
| <i>It is part of everything in this work, a basic principle (social)</i>   | Common value base and respect   | Trust as an important phenomenon in promoting ethical issues at work                          |

**Table 1.**  
Data analysis



an important element to improve young professionals' adaptation to working community, (2) Trust is a key factor in strengthening professionalism and (3) Trust is an important phenomenon in promoting ethical issues at work.

*Result 1. Trust is an important element to improve young professionals' adaptation to working community*

According to the participants, they had positive experiences of trust in their current working communities. The data highlighted that trust was mainly associated with co-workers, but also considered in relation to customers, or patients. Trust was particularly strongly associated with *transparency and mutual support, reciprocity and shared responsibility and psychological safety* (e.g. Fagley and Adler, 2012; Troman, 2000). Based on the participants' answers, trust was perceived as a resource that builds a positive connection and interaction between the members of the working community. According to the data, these elements of the meaning of trust at work improved young professionals' feeling of belonging to the work environment. The feeling of belonging was based on the feeling of being understood or believing in others' good will (Dinh *et al.*, 2021).

*Transparency and mutual support.* The importance of transparency and mutual support was significant. They were mentioned in every interview. According to the interviewees, trust requires a direct encounter and an opportunity to receive mutual support if necessary.

You can always go there and there are listening ears. – I mean that if you fall, you will be caught (social field).

In my opinion, for this group, I would say that for the most part, it's openness (health sector).

Interviews revealed that in a trusting working community, support is provided *easily and actively*. The participants' descriptions included the idea of *active professional agency*, where trust is not only provided from outside, but also built by individuals themselves. Transparency requires mutual sensitivity (Davis, 2008). Its effects on trust can be noticed (Tomlinson and Schnackenberg, 2022).

Even though support was mentioned in many answers, respondents spoke differently about asking for help. For instance, one interviewee said that they were afraid of asking for help, while another one said they were allowed to ask for help from "everyone at all times". The third respondent described that they were regularly allocated time for discussions with the supervisor. Different cultures (Mansour and Zaheer, 2021) of providing and receiving help also appeared differently between organizations. That was one of the most significant results concerning openness and mutual support.

While talking about mutual support, young professionals emphasized peer support more than support from supervisors, even though that was also appreciated. Peer support was perceived as natural and relieving in certain situations.

A co-worker helps, as long as you manage to relieve pressure and tell about your feelings, it helps for coping (social).

Everyone dares to admit if they don't know something (social).

We ask a lot and rely on each other and we can laugh even in a stressful situation (IT).

There is no such hierarchy here, which is nice. Everyone dares to ask or say that I don't know this, could somebody come to help (health).

*Reciprocity and shared responsibility.* The importance of reciprocity and shared responsibility was one important factor of trust that emerged from the research data. A reciprocal, equal relationship is about giving and receiving, and the individual should not feel that he is a burden to others. Trust is built on collaboration, reciprocity and shared responsibility.

You have to be trusted too — you have to be a good example on that (IT).

*Psychological safety.* Studies have shown that there is a strong link between psychological safety and trust (Edmondson and Zhike, 2014). This was also highlighted in this research data. According to the interviewees, psychological security manifested itself as an opportunity to try new things in a safe atmosphere. According to them, allowing employees in the early stages of their careers in the working community to be themselves and giving them freedom to organize their work as they see fit increases confidence. On the other hand, however, it is safe to make mistakes (Edmondson, 1999, 2018).

No one is looking over your shoulder, but they really trust me. It's a pretty great thing (IT)

If there is just a terrible chaos at work and you cannot do anything. Still, we can always laugh at it together (social).

It is important that everyone feels safe in the workplace, and then customers are safe too (health).

Trust was an important element to improve young professionals' adaptation to working community. The peers' role was significant in this.

### *Result 2. Trust is a key factor in strengthening professionalism*

Professional dimension as a dimension of trust was construed as concrete professional tasks related to trust and the experienced professionalism (Harré, 1999). Participants' conversation was structured through the concepts of given and earned trust, *responding to professional expectations, own professionalism and how to develop in it*. Distrust as part of professional dimension was less accentuated but it appeared in descriptions about insecurity of continuation of work and constant turnover of co-workers. According to Troman (2000), distrust can increase isolation and insecurity.

*Responding to professional expectations and making competence visible.* The professional dimension of trust was described in terms of how trust can accelerate the development of competence. This meant that when an employee gains responsibility, trust enables them to develop at work. Correspondingly, given responsibility offers an opportunity "to test" and self-evaluate young professionals' skills. Trust was based on a sense of appreciation. The results highlighted learning together and that trust accelerates professional development and agency (Smith, 2012) as well as produces professional competence (Dinh *et al.*, 2021).

When people get a task that they might feel scared of at first, but then when they get through it, they really shine (health).

According to the data, trust was decreased by insecurity of continuation of work and high turnover of co-workers and its impact on customer relationships. One example was the regulation of work and the associated appointment procedure.

My employment contract is ending at the end of the year and it's still unclear if I can continue (social).

Based on the data, the professional dimension of trust indicated that in the healthcare sector the participants talked more about opportunities to develop at work than in the social sector, where concerns about the continuity of employment and recruitment were raised during the interview. In IT, the type of the employment relationship did not come up at all.

### *Result 3. Trust is an important phenomenon in promoting ethical issues at work*

According to the data, the third result was related to *good manners, values and mutual respect*. As Luhmann (1979) points out, trust arises from shared values and culture. Values can be the declared values of an organization, inherent or tacitly accepted norms that are perceived as

important and manifest themselves in action, whether or not they are announced. Trust manifested itself in good manners, values and mutual respect; within ethical matters at work.

*Common value base and respect.* In the ethical dimension of trust, interviewees described trust as the starting point and key value of all activities. Trust was a declared organizational value in some workplaces and a key starting point for work.

Trust is our company's biggest value for next year (IT).

It is part of everything in this work, a basic principle (social).

We talk about whether you have to sign non-disclosure agreements, but don't we already have the secrecy obligation? I think it's automatic (IT).

Additionally, mutual respect was named as the cornerstone of trust. This was reflected in the responses, for example, by giving a colleague a chance to succeed, rather than competing with them.

### Summary of results

According to the first result, *Trust is an important element to improve young professionals' adaptation to working community*, trust at work is based on reciprocity, shared responsibility, support and help from peers or colleagues and feeling of psychological safety. The result is in line with previous studies (Karhapää and Savolainen, 2018; Raatikainen, 2011) which suggest that reciprocity and helpfulness are the most important factors in a trusting work environment. Trust promotes an experience of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). In a trusting work environment, individuals can be themselves with all their uncertainties or everyday life incompleteness (Baier, 1986). A trusting atmosphere improves the experience of feeling of belonging. This is particularly important for young professionals who have recently entered working life.

The second significant result, *Trust is a key factor in strengthening professionalism*, is the professional dimension of trust. According to it, a predictable work atmosphere can improve overall trust at work. The results of this study showed how an early-stage career experience of gaining responsibility and succeeding in work tasks increase trust. Both self-confidence and an atmosphere of trust increase trust. However, the participants did not point out the reverse side of responsibility, such as burnout (Baer et al., 2014), even though it could have been possible for someone in the early stages of their careers. Participants described gaining freedom and responsibility as a sign of trust, not a burden. The result is in line with the findings of Mishra and Mishra (2012, 2013), who pointed out that trusted supervisors improved employees' "sense of competence and desire to develop professionally" (see also Raatikainen, 2011). This is important because often supervisors or managers give tasks at work.

The third finding of the study, *Trust is an important phenomenon in promoting ethical issues at work*, focuses on ethical issues, shared values and mutual respect. This result is similar to Luhmann's (1979) writings of trust. For strengthening trust (Luhmann, 1979), respect is needed. For instance, respect culminates in listening to others and paying positive attention to them—not ignoring, being indifferent or competing with them. The general "good will" is manifested in a positive attitude towards others (Koivumäki, 2008; Dinh et al., 2021). This is an important ethical issue. According to Kramer (1999), individual's reputation influences others' interpretations of their trustworthiness and with hearsay and beliefs creates an impression of their trustworthiness or unreliability. In an atmosphere of respect, individuals do not speak behind their backs. It also prevents overall suspicion (Nooteboom, 2001). On the contrary, an atmosphere of trust develops by strengthening open communication (Ikonen, 2013). Young professionals, at the beginning of their careers, considered the promotion of trust ethics to be very important.

## Discussion

Due to the nature of this study, the research results should be viewed critically. The results can be seen as one suggestion to structure and increase understanding of trust in working life, from the perspective of young professionals in the early stages of their careers. As all research, the studies included in this review have several limitations that need to be taken into account. First one of them is the size of the data, also in this study. Second, although literature has been searched carefully, better literature may always exist for discussion on trust at work from young professionals' points of view, even though research is scarce on this specific topic. Nonetheless, literature of this study includes the most relevant classics of trust research. Third, the method has its limits, because it is based on focus group interviews, not interviews of individuals. On the other hand, the interviewed team was offered time to reflect on trust in their own team.

Still, this study serves as a basis for discussion of trust in work relationships. In additionally, it is noteworthy that the participants were at the beginning of their careers, joining a new working community. They were in the early stages of building a professional identity, seeking confirmation of their skills and position in the working community. We recognize that this may have had an impact on data collection, which was a focus group interview. Only a few participants in the interview wanted to highlight factors related to distrust, even if they had appeared at work. We recognize that exploring trust requires trust, and we acknowledge it. Data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic (see e.g. [van Zoonen et al., 2021](#)).

## Conclusions

In this paper, we focused on young professionals who had recently entered working life and are at the beginning of their careers. The study is related to the discussion on trust in bilateral relations (*interpersonal trust*, [Ma et al., 2019](#)). The results were divided into three main categories: (1) trust is an important element in improving young professionals' adaptation into the working community, (2) trust is a key factor in strengthening professionalism and professional development at work and (3) trust is an important phenomenon in promoting ethical issues at work. Trust in terms of young professionals' adaptation to new working environment should have an explicit organizational focus.

In conclusion, we suggest that the role of trust in strengthening young people's professionalism, as well as in promoting emotional sustainability in their working life needs to be taken into account in human resource development and leadership. This study implies that trust at work should focus on discussing young professionals' thoughts, expectations, feelings and experiences of trust at work as part of transitioning from graduation into working life, or in early stages of their careers. Trust should not only be discussed in dyadic discussions between young professionals and supervisors but also as part of team discussions. Our suggestion is that trust should be in the core of team discussions, not just part of the team's social and emotional dimensions of its functionality and capacity. Courage and skills to take part in such discussions is needed from all parties. Especially managers should be able to create a trusting environment to talk about trust.

Additionally, based on our results, we suggest that discussion on trust could be, for instance, an orientation situation at the beginning of one's career that can promote or impede a trusting employment relationship when joining the working community. Already during studies or internships, the theme of trust and its significance at work should be explored. In particular, the importance of peers in terms of trust and their importance at work should be taken into account. By understanding young professionals' point of view, we can prevent excessive job changes or dissatisfaction at work. Furthermore, even though trust has its cultural aspects, it has strong personal aspects as well. All these different aspects need to be considered, while leading a team or being part of a team. All members in an organization should have the skills to understand trust. Trust should be seen as a skill or competence, to develop positive functional dimensions at work.

The purpose of this study was to contribute to this line of research on trust at work. From this point of view, we suggest that this study's results be considered when mentoring young professionals and familiarizing them with their new work, working community and teams. The trust resource contributes to and promotes participation in working life. Managers and co-workers can learn about trust as a phenomenon and skill, while developing more emotionally sustainable working environments for young professionals.

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**Appendix**  
**Interview questions and basics components of data analysis**

The early stages of careers

**1053**

**Table A1.**  
 Interview questions

| Theme for group discussion | Open questions for open group discussion                       |
|----------------------------|--|
| Trust                      | “Tell about trust and its meaning at work?”                    |
| Job satisfaction           | “Tell about job satisfaction and its meaning at work?”         |
| Encouraging atmosphere     | “Tell about encouraging atmosphere and its meaning at work?”   |
| The importance of feedback | “Tell about encouraging atmosphere and its meaning at work?”   |
| Teamwork at work           | “Tell about encouraging teamwork at work–its meaning at work?” |
| Values at work             | “Tell about values at work its meaning at work?”               |

| Example of Trust researchers  | Core element in trust   | Example (researchers’ preliminary understanding)  |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| Baier 1986 philosophy         | ethics,   | definition, cognitive decision, feelings/emotions |
| Govier 1993 philosophy        | roles, different level of trust in different context                | definition, situation and relationships           |
| Luhman1979 (sociology)        | people’s mutual knowledge, shared values and culture, socialization | definition, situation and relationships           |
| Giddens 1991                  | socialization and relationships                                     | definition, situation and relationships           |
| Putnam 1993, 2000 (sociology) | social capital  | definition, situation and relationships           |
| Troman 2000 philosophy        | benefits  | definition, feelings/emotions                     |
| Erikson (psychology), etc.    |   | definition, feelings/emotions                     |

| Elements of analysis based on researchers’ preliminary understanding of trust |
|---|
| 1. What and how participants talked about trust (what is trust?) (definition) |
| 2. What situations trust is involved and how? (situation and relationships)   |
| 3. What kind of feelings and other factors are connected to trust? (feelings) |
| --> Overall descriptions of trust at work                                     |

Source(s): Raatikainen, 2022

**Table A2.**  
 Basics components of data analysis

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