

Navigating Multiple Careers: Enhancing Vocational Well-Being in Moonlighters

Charles P. Chen & Yiyuan Zhang
University of Toronto

Abstract

Moonlighting—defined as multiple job holding—has seen a significant increase, especially among young adults aged 25-34 in North America, with prevalent sectors being healthcare, social assistance, and education. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted moonlighting trends, prompting remote work popularity. Despite financial motivations, young adults engage in moonlighting for personal growth and skill acquisition. Moonlighters, however, face challenges such as poor work-life balance, role and identity conflicts, and emotional distress. To address these challenges, this article proposes career helping interventions based on happenstance learning theory and Cochran's narrative career counselling, aiming to enhance vocational well-being among young moonlighters in North America.

Keywords: Moonlighting, multiple job holding, vocational well-being, career counselling intervention, happenstance learning theory, narrative career theory

Moonlighting, or multiple job holding, exists in labour markets in both developing and developed countries (Dickey et al., 2011). Moonlighting refers to engaging in a secondary job or multiple jobs in addition to an individual's primary employment. Multiple job holders can be paid employees or self-employed, working full-time, part-time, or any combination thereof (Fulford & Patterson, 2019). Moonlighting is permitted in the United States and Canada, and the trend in North America has seen an increase in recent decades. In particular, significant growth has occurred in the moonlighting population among women in Canada, rising from approximately 2.4% in 1978 to 5% in 1998 (Sussman, 1998). According to Statistics Canada, in 2019 the most common sectors for moonlighting among women were health care, social assistance, and educational services (Fulford & Patterson, 2019). This trend has continued into 2023, with the top moonlighting sectors in Canada continuing to be those where most workers are women (Statistics Canada, 2024). As of 2019, the Canadian prevalence rate of moonlighting among both men and women was 30%, 3 times higher than in 2011 (Glavin, 2020). In the United States, between 5% and 35% of the working population holds at least 1 part-time job in addition to a primary full-time job. As of 2019, this trend has continued to rise steadily across various fields, including information technology (IT), engineering, and teaching (Campion et al., 2019).

In the past 3 years, many people have experienced financial constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic, including job loss and income insecurity. Despite a slight drop in Canadian moonlighting rates in 2020, they rapidly increased again in 2021 (Asravor, 2021; Clarke & Fields, 2022). As of 2023, this trend has continued, with the percentage of Canadians holding more than 1 job increasing by 0.1% from 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2024). Following lockdowns, both the United States and Canadian governments initiated recovery measures, focusing on industry-level jobs, labour participation rates, and overall labour market conditions. This triggered a swift and significant change in work patterns, with remote jobs and work-from-home options becoming popular choices, particularly in IT, teaching, and administration. This shift significantly contributes to the long-term implications of moonlighting (Mark et al., 2022). Statista research in the United States reported 48.7 million remote workers by May 2020, and this trend has continued to accelerate in recent years (Statista, 2023). The proportion of remote workers has more than tripled, increasing from 7.4% in 2016 to 24.3% in 2021. Moreover, many moonlighters now have a remote part-time job while holding another full-time job. According to Statistics Canada (Morissette et al., 2023), the remote work model is a contributing factor to the rising trends of moonlighting.

In North America, moonlighting is most common among young adults in their 20s and 30s (5.0%), who have consistently exhibited the highest rate compared to adults aged 36-50 (4.1%) and those over 50 (3.6%) in the past 2 decades (Fulford & Patterson, 2019). As of 2023, 6.6% of young Canadian adults moonlight, compared to 5.8% of middle-aged adults and 4.4% of those over 55 (Statistics Canada, 2024). Some research

suggests that individuals expecting to moonlight often cite ongoing motivations. These include financial hardship, the desire to explore new skills, and gaining experience in alternative occupations to prepare for new roles (Dickey et al., 2011; Malik & Menal Dahiya, 2023; Panos et al., 2014).

Moonlighters aged 25–34 also face several challenges affecting their overall career well-being. They often experience poor work-life balance, juggling different roles and responsibilities, and emotional exhaustion leading to lowered job satisfaction and overall vocational well-being (Dodanwala et al., 2021; Hämmig, 2018; Vyas & Shrivastava, 2017). Because research on moonlighting between ages 25 and 34 is limited, this article identifies common career issues for these individuals. Using happenstance learning theory (Krumboltz, 2009) and Cochran's narrative career counselling theory (Cochran, 1997), the article explores career interventions and counselling strategies to help young moonlighters enhance their vocational wellness.

Career Issues in Moonlighting

This section will discuss 3 major career issues faced by young moonlighters: poor work-life balance, role and identity conflict, and emotional distress and burnout. Work-life challenges addressed include less time for family, friends, and leisure; working during holidays; and poor work satisfaction. Issues of role and identity conflict in young moonlighters will also be explored, in particular the ways in which navigating multiple professional identities can complicate the construction of a coherent narrative of professional identity. Finally, the emotional distress and burnout associated with moonlighting in young adults, and potential contributing factors such as student loan debt, will be discussed.

Poor Work–Life Balance

The most common challenges faced by young moonlighters involve maintaining work-life balance. Sirgy and Lee (2017) introduced a holistic definition of work-life balance, emphasizing a high level of role engagement in both work and nonwork life, with minimal conflicts between these roles. Nonwork life encompasses family life, social life, leisure activities, spiritual pursuits, and community engagement. Balancing multiple jobs can pose challenges in managing work and nonwork life, potentially affecting career performance and overall well-being. However, according to Byrne (2005), young individuals conceptualize work-life balance differently from traditional concepts, seeking more productive work conditions, adapting to new technologies, taking on greater responsibility, experiencing a sense of ownership, and avoiding bringing problems from home to work. They also value time for personal growth, social connections, and life outside of work.

Despite these preferences, young moonlighters encounter challenges in balancing work and life due to their longer working hours compared to single jobholders. This results in less time available for family, friends, leisure activities, and relaxation (Vyas & Shrivastava, 2017). According to a report from Statistics Canada in 2018 (Fulford & Patterson, 2019), multiple jobholders work an average of 45.9 hours per week across all jobs, significantly exceeding the work hours of single jobholders (36.1 hours per week). Recent estimates suggest that young moonlighters in the United States work an average of 46.8 hours per week, compared to the average young employee working 38.6 hours per week (Webster et al., 2018). Additionally, many moonlighting jobs require work outside normal business hours (9–5). They may involve working on weekends, overnight or during holidays, especially in roles related to education, customer service, driving, and industrial warehouses. This can significantly impact the availability of time for social connections, family activities, and participation in important holidays or cultural events. Young moonlighters may find spending holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving with family or friends challenging, potentially resulting in social exclusion, loneliness, and a lower level of life satisfaction (Achterbergh et al., 2020).

Studies suggest this issue is salient for young moonlighters who are seeking economic stability (Dickey et al., 2011). Hamel (1967) demonstrated that income plays a crucial role in workers having dual jobs. If primary job earnings rise, the likelihood of moonlighting decreases, and vice versa. Economic hardship, coupled with limited earnings from the primary job, compels many young adults to seek additional employment, making moonlighting a survival strategy for those in relatively low-income households. Having multiple sources of income not only provides financial stability and flexibility but also helps individuals reach

their financial goals faster. Likewise, the drastic changes in labour market conditions over the past 3 decades, driven by increased globalization, declining unionization, student loan debt, and the failure of the minimum wage to keep up with inflation, have made young adults work extensive hours (Danziger & Ratner, 2010).

The long working hours associated with moonlighting can blur the boundaries between work and personal time. Moonlighters might not be able to adhere to consistent work-life boundaries and manage work-work boundaries between multiple jobs. When conflicts arise between work commitments and nonwork life, a negative spillover effect can significantly impact work satisfaction and the quality of nonwork life (Kelliher et al., 2018). Furthermore, long work hours may lead to excessive energy expenditure, resulting in various physical reactions such as fatigue, distress, and compromised sleep quality, ultimately affecting the time available for family and friends (Hsu et al., 2019). In contrast, younger employees with consistent work hours, breaks, and weekends are more likely to experience predictability and have time available for personal activities, contributing to a better work-life balance (Hill et al., 2001).

Despite being remote, many moonlighting jobs may not eliminate the challenges associated with work-life balance. Even when working from home, individuals report that moonlighting blurs the boundaries between work and personal time, and difficulties related to sleep can be attributed to the inability to detach from work (Kinnunen et al., 2017). Additionally, some young individuals are eager to pursue personal growth by expanding their hobbies and acquiring new skills to enrich their lives, even if they are not experiencing immediate negative financial shocks (Malik & Menal Dahiya, 2023). Moonlighting also offers opportunities for young individuals to gain experience in different fields, increase their knowledge, build portfolios, and positively impact productivity. This includes developing technician skills, soft skills, industry-specific knowledge, analytical skills, video-editing skills, and graphic design skills. Young individuals often seek to pursue their passion or creative endeavours, building confidence, challenging themselves, and achieving a sense of accomplishment—fulfillment not commonly derived from their primary job. They are also more likely than others to experience life imbalance. They are too focused on career, which results in ignoring their leisure activities and self-care, such as inadequate sleep and less available time for friends and family, negatively impacting their vocational well-being (Jahangir & Tahseen, 2023).

Role and Identity Conflict in Young Moonlighters

According to Erikson's identity development theory (1959), identity development is an ongoing process throughout the lifespan. Young adults aged 25 to 34 are expected to undergo 2 stages of identity development: establishing intimacy and relationships with others and contributing to society while being part of a family. Career development plays a crucial role in this, leading to maturity and stability during early adulthood. This period is marked by significant identity exploration, including career choices, decisions, work experiences, and autonomy. However, young moonlighters may experience role and identity conflicts, stemming from challenges in balancing different roles, managing boundaries, and integrating various aspects of personal and professional identities.

Research indicates that young people's work experiences contribute to shaping their future work-related attitudes, values, motivations, and behaviours (Loughlin & Barling, 2001). A report from the Pew Research Centre (Leppert, 2023) demonstrated that around 44% of young workers expressed satisfaction with their first primary job, which was lower than the satisfaction reported by older workers aged 50–64. Koen et al. (2012) reported that young adults were more likely to struggle to construct a positive work-related identity when transitioning from study to employment. Young adults aged 25–34 just starting in their careers are more likely to see moonlighting as a conduit for obtaining new skills and expertise, even though multiple job holding may take away valuable time that could be spent with family and friends, socializing, or pursuing other interests (Malik & Menal Dahiya, 2023).

Working multiple jobs creates conflicting demands in terms of time, responsibilities, and expectations for young adults. This impacts their ability to simultaneously meet each job's expectations and potentially affects job satisfaction. Studies also show that young workers are vulnerable to role conflicts due to a lack of life skills and experiences to cope with them, leading to job distress (Dodanwala et al., 2021). Therefore, young moonlighters working in 2 or more jobs are more likely than others to experience a role crisis, struggling to

switch roles from their primary work to secondary jobs. Different job positions requiring distinct professional skills, attitudes, and behaviours may challenge young moonlighters in integrating these aspects of their professional selves, resulting in identity fragmentation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Some young moonlighters expect to develop a new career by having multiple jobs as a stepping stone (Panos et al., 2014). This aligns with the stochastic dynamic model established by Paxon and Sicherman (1996), which demonstrates that people who decide to take a secondary job often change their primary job later. These individuals aim to work more to search for a portfolio of jobs that provide desirable characteristics, facilitating the process of transitioning to a different occupation. Young adults today take a different view of their careers than in the past; they explore different career paths to find a better fit for their skills, interests, and values rather than seeking a stable job for basic living (Koen et al., 2012). Thus, moonlighting can be a beneficial way for young adults to gain diverse experiences and discover vocational passions that align with their long-term goals and aspirations, especially if they feel dissatisfied or unfulfilled in their current jobs. However, another challenge for young moonlighters is perceiving their professional identities within their vocations. Because young adults are in the process of constructing their identities and seeking social roles, having multiple jobs may hinder them from forming a clear narrative of their professional identities, potentially impacting the purpose and direction of their career goals (Pratt et al., 2006). Compared to young adults with a single job, those with multiple jobs may find it more challenging to adopt and perceive their identities, engage in their careers, and develop their career values (Boyle, 2019).

Emotional Distress and Burnout in Young Moonlighters

The relentless pursuit of financial stability and professional growth often takes a toll on mental well-being. Research indicates that work-life imbalance and excessive work hours strongly predict emotional distress and burnout (Skinner & Pocock, 2008). In particular, job burnout is not confined to thoughts about specific jobs or professions; rather, it is closely tied to the inability to balance, incorporate, or reconcile work, life, and family. This imbalance inevitably leads to distress, burnout and, in severe cases, the intention to leave one's profession (Hämmig, 2018).

Young adults with multiple jobs often lack the skills and strategies to achieve a balanced life, especially considering their recent entry into the workforce from academia. For instance, Sturges and Guest (2004) argued that young adults may have only been accustomed to study and class hours during school, with little experience in handling 8-hour shifts as part of a business schedule. Despite their pursuit of career success and a balanced life, tolerating excessive work hours for multiple jobs can undermine the possibility of achieving work-life balance, ultimately leading to increased exhaustion.

Young adults aged 25–34 are also susceptible to the pressures of building a career and potential financial stress. Those with multiple jobs might face various debts, including car financing, housing, student loans, and childcare expenses. According to the Canada Student Financial Assistance Program Annual Report (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2023), from 2021–2022, Canadian students carried an average student debt of around \$28,000 and took an average of 10 years to pay off these loans. Individuals aged 25–34 generally have a lower predicted income than other age groups because their salaries may reflect entry-level positions obtained after completing high school or postsecondary education. The average annual income for Canadians aged 25–34 in 2021 was \$53,500, moderately lower than those aged 35–44, whose average income was \$68,000 (Statistics Canada, 2023). Financial hardships contribute to elevated stress levels among young adults, exacerbating the challenges they face.

Career Counselling Implications for Young Moonlighters

In this section, happenstance learning theory (Krumboltz, 2009) and narrative career counselling theory (Cochran, 1997) will be used to suggest potential approaches career counsellors might take when career counselling young moonlighters. Using happenstance learning theory, ways career counsellors might help young moonlighters adapt positively to unplanned events, such as embracing opportunities to make diverse connections and cultivate mentorships, will be outlined. Using narrative career counselling theory, ways by

which career counsellors might harness the power of storytelling to help young moonlighters construct a coherent professional identity despite conflicting job roles will be discussed.

Using Happenstance Learning Theory

Happenstance learning theory (Krumboltz, 2009) illustrates the roles of social learning and unexpected events in shaping individuals' career choices and development. This theory offers several components beneficial to young moonlighters in career interventions. According to this theory, career counsellors teach clients to act for a more satisfying career and personal life, engaging in exploration to generate benefits from unplanned events (Krumboltz, 1998). Young moonlighters often encounter unplanned events (e.g., family emergencies, sickness, incidents) while working, challenging their ability to balance work and life. This approach helps clients understand past responses to unexpected events and respond positively to future chance events. It also encourages learning new skills, interests, beliefs, and work habits. The approach considers clients' environmental, cultural, and educational backgrounds, using lived experience for career decision-making (Linder-Pelz & Hall, 2005).

Happenstance learning theory essentially encourages young moonlighters to be open-minded and adaptable in the face of unexpected opportunities arising from dual employment. By valuing potential learning and growth from unplanned events, moonlighters may discover new avenues for skill development and career advancement. The happenstance model encompasses 5 skills—curiosity: exploring new learning opportunities; persistence: exerting effort despite setbacks; flexibility: changing attitudes and circumstances; optimism: viewing new opportunities as possible and attainable; and risk-taking: acting in the face of uncertain outcomes (Krumboltz, 1998). The career counsellor thus plays a role in encouraging clients to take a different perspective toward chance events so that they can perceive and respond to unexpected chances to improve in their career development, rather than seeing unexpected events as a challenge. Career counsellors must also encourage clients to take an active role in cultivating open-mindedness and an exploratory attitude willing to take risks and embrace chances. This could result in enhancing the life career pathway and vocational well-being (Chen, 2005). Rice (2013) emphasized that people who have adopted happenstance learning theory are more likely to accept uncertainties, actively change plans, and work hard to overcome barriers and consistently pursue their interests and chosen careers. Hence, career counsellors can help moonlighters develop these 5 skills to facilitate the development of abilities, enhancing their adaptability in the face of unforeseen challenges in either job.

Young adults often feel uncomfortable and overwhelmed by unplanned events. Planned happenstance theory—informed mentorship could help them optimize their attitudes to chance opportunities by cultivating the 5 skills (Vo et al., 2021). In North America, mentorship programs are among the most popular and beneficial strategies for skill development, experience sharing, stress relief, and networking among various age groups (Miller, 2002). During the mentorship program, young moonlighters can be acknowledged and reframe the uncertainty associated with happenstance and unplanned events in their dual jobs as an opportunity for growth-based positive mentorship experiences. This can be an effective career-assistance strategy for young moonlighters, aiding in achieving work-life balance (Lee et al., 2009). For instance, a young moonlighter struggling with an imbalanced life, unable to spend the New Year holiday with family due to work demands, could connect with peers facing similar challenges. Mentorship could effectively address challenges by teaching them to understand that growth often arises under circuitous and unpredictable circumstances, encouraging them to embrace these chances for skill exploration and furthering their career development. Mentorship could also help them reduce emotional distress and maintain high levels of job satisfaction. Moreover, mentorships facilitate social connections for young individuals lacking a social life due to excessive workloads. Mentors regularly engage within a specified period (e.g., once a week), fostering lasting social networks among peers (Bell & Rosowsky, 2021). Building diverse connections, moonlighters may encounter unforeseen opportunities, such as mentorships or collaborations, positively impacting their career development.

Using Cochran's Narrative Career Counselling Theory

Cochran's narrative career counselling encourages individuals to focus on the meaning of experiences, the reflexive process involved, and the contextual aspects of career paths. It allows clients to link their inner and social evolving experiences into a coherent whole (Cochran, 1997; Savickas et al., 2009). The 7 episodes of narrative career counselling are defining a career problem, composing a life history, eliciting a future narrative, reality construction, changing a life structure, enacting a role, and crystallizing a decision (Cochran, 1997). It emphasizes subjectivity and meaning, aiming to facilitate self-reflection and explain self-concepts for enhanced self-understanding. According to this theory, counsellors listen to clients' stories, capturing the inner means through which they reveal their experiences, and together with clients guide them to uncover their dreams, values, goals, and skills for future career development. Clients can piece together their stories as storytellers, informing their career-related decisions, goals, and directions (McMahon & Watson, 2013). In particular, the first 3 episodes can be beneficial to help young moonlighters relieve emotional distress and identity crises, enhancing vocational well-being.

During the first episode, counsellors can help clients identify or clarify a career problem, which might be the young moonlighter juggling life and feeling inner or external challenges. Counsellors encourage clients to facilitate the career problem naturally by themselves, but they can also guide them if needed. Once the client identifies the career problem, counsellors are responsible for helping them reconstruct their life histories and personal information to uncover resources for overcoming challenges. During this second episode, young moonlighters use storytelling to examine how their multiple roles contribute to their sense of self and professional identity by exploring their past experiences, cultural backgrounds, life habits, personality, and personal development (Bujold, 2004). Once concerns have been explored, the career counsellor plays a role as a co-creator to help clients enrich the details of a meaning-making process through their narratives. Consequently, the career counsellor can also assist the client to identify and organize the themes of the stories before moving to the third episode. These themes gather life events into the unity of a story, gaining significance and predicting the future along with themes (Charokopaki, 2019; McIlveen & Patton, 2007). During the third episode, the career counsellor continuously works with the client to construct a desired future narrative that represents a combination of their motivations, strengths, interests, and values, as outlined in the early episodes. This way, young moonlighters could be inspired by self-reflection to understand their career identities based on expressing their life themes with a specific occupation or career experience (McMahon & Watson, 2012).

Additionally, the idea of life themes in the third episode can be very effective in rebuilding the boundary of existing self-concepts. This is because life themes provide the client with a sense of unity in their life history from consciously or unconsciously perceived fundamental childhood courses, thereby triggering adaptive efforts to tackling problematic situations. Young moonlighters usually face emotional challenges and lack the confidence to overcome them because of past learning experiences. In this case, the career counsellor can assist them in exploring and reconstructing their career identities by coping with boundary experiences from childhood. Thus, the intervention can prevent young moonlighters from having a cognitive problem when they are facing an identity crisis, are in a very challenging situation, or have lost the ability to cope (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). For example, a young moonlighter facing an identity crisis and confusion about career goals and interests in 2 jobs could benefit from the counsellor guiding them to tell their stories, such as family background, significant relationships, culture, events, and memories. By helping the client put these elements together, the counsellor assists in creating a configuration, such as the meaning of life, which might address their concerns. This self-reflective process allows the client to gain insights into their values and motivation and the impact of role conflicts on their overall well-being (McIlveen & Patton, 2007). In general, this intervention follows a "past–present–future" approach: it illustrates the road to understanding a career despite potential changes over time, such as the achievements, career interests, and skills the client is likely to pursue. This approach serves as an effective tool to construct and conceptualize clients' vocational pathways, particularly for young moonlighters. Once they have a clear goal and no confusion of professional identities between multiple jobs, they feel empowered and in control, resulting in a high level of vocational well-being.

Conclusion

Given the substantial increase in the proportion of young people aged 25–34 years engaging in multiple jobholding, or moonlighting, this article has delved into the ongoing career issues and challenges they face in North America. These include an imbalanced life, role and identity crises, and emotional distress. Some key principles derived from Krumboltz's happenstance learning theory and Cochran's narrative career counselling theory are offered to address these specific issues. Importantly, this article provides preliminary ideas to enhance the vocational well-being of younger moonlighters through the application of career-assistance strategies. Future research should focus on exploring various career-counselling strategies and techniques to enhance the vocational well-being of this population. This will contribute to fostering a more equitable and supportive work environment in North America.

Author Biographies

Charles P. Chen, PhD, is Professor of Counselling and Clinical Psychology and a Canada Research Chair in Life Career Development at the University of Toronto.

Yiyuan Zhang, MEd, is a research assistant at the University of Toronto.

Corresponding Author

Address correspondence to Professor Charles P. Chen, Counselling and Clinical Psychology Program, Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, 7th Floor, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5S 1V6. Tel: (416) 978-0718 E-mail: cp.chen@utoronto.ca

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