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**"Sensitive career management: A Handbook for HR and
Counseling Experts"**

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INTRODUCTION

High sensitivity is an inherited temperament trait and it's the professional name is sensory processing sensitivity. The intensity of the trait is related to the fact that the nervous system processes all the information that reaches it very carefully. Concepts related to the explanation of differential sensitivity have been gaining popularity in recent years. This is because the trait has important implications for quality of life. There have been many studies verifying the importance of sensitivity for various spheres of human functioning. Colloquially, sensitivity is more often identified with weakness than with strength. In contrast, we know from the results of research over the past few decades that sensitivity is not just about strong emotions, shrugging, worrying, crying, or reacting fearfully. Highly sensitive people are also attentive, conscientious and empathetic. The developed profiles of sensitivity also make it clear that for the development of the potential of highly sensitive people, the quality of the environment in which they grow up and, in turn, live and work is particularly important. Individuals with high intensity of the trait account for approx. 30% of the population. On the one hand, this percentage is large enough that it is difficult to consider this trait a dysfunction. On the other hand, however, it is small enough that places of rest, work, play and study are usually organized for people with low to moderate sensitivity. We also know, that from an evaluative point of view, this trait were not necessary, socially useful, it would probably not occur in people.

One of the aspect of sensitivity understood as a temperament trait is the tendency to be overwhelmed. Sensory stimulus-rich environments (e.g., loud, intensely lit, crowded, chaotic) can be more tiring for highly sensitive people than for their co-workers. HSP are more likely to be disturbed by changes in the workplace, large amounts of stimulation, such as working in an open space. A tendency to overstimulation can result in avoidance or poor handling of conflicts that occur in the workplace, as well as greater stress. According to many employers, an employee's apparent stress, difficulty working under time pressure can be identified as a weakness. Deep processing of information (another trait related to sensitivity) can increase decision-making time. So, if we focus only on the visible manifestations of attentive processing, we can consider that such a person has problems with decision-making, it is difficult for him/her to decide on something, to choose. In such situations, sensitive people need support and constructive feedback, which is rarely offered. Instead, sensitive employees are advised to become resilient and toughen up. If we look at some expressions of sensitivity, we may hastily consider them a burden to the company. After all, under unfavorable conditions, behaviors in which one sees a flaw come to the fore.

In this publication, we try to shift the trait as a relevant and important resource. Moreover, we propose to shift the focus from the diagnosis of a person (his trait and personality) to the diagnosis of the environment, because a healthy professional environment will benefit not only highly sensitive people but everyone. And while many of the theories being developed today are of great applied value, applying them to life can be a challenge. Changes in the work environment are often bottom-up. In part, they are forced by the actions of employees of the younger generation, who are increasingly aware of the importance of the quality of the environment for their well-being and mental health. Therefore, spreading reliable knowledge



about the importance of the quality of the environment for the sense of satisfaction, effectiveness and efficiency at work has become the goal of the team of experts developing the PRO-MOTION project. This book is the result of an international collaboration of researchers and practitioners who have set as a common goal the development of action-oriented support for highly sensitive people in their immediate environment. Exploration of the issue of environmental sensitivity has also shown us that conditions that are particularly favorable for highly sensitive people are also conditions for development for other workers whose sensitivity to environmental stimuli is average or low.

The next sections of the book address the issue of identifying the trait, the need to take it into account in the context of professional work, and opportunities for support and assistance. The first chapter, "High sensitivity at work: why it should be on the employer's agenda," is devoted to introducing the importance of the trait for career development. The next chapter, "Identifying High Sensitivity in Career Design and Management," discusses the main areas in which high sensitivity manifests itself, as well as some of the psychometric tools used to identify it. It also describes the strengths of highly sensitive individuals in the work environment, revealing their potential positive impact on companies, work environments and interactions among co-workers. The third chapter, "Environmental Sensitivity in Career Development through the Lens of Calling, Meaning, and Volition" analyzes the issue of professional life and the importance of professional development for the highly sensitive people. It highlights how the unique characteristics of highly sensitive people shape their career paths and job satisfaction. The chapter also includes evidence-based recommendations for practitioners. The next chapter, "High Sensitivity in Vocational Education and Training: How to Support Highly Sensitive Students," presents strategies that Vocational Education and Training counselors can use when counseling highly sensitive students. The content is based on the premise that a Vocational Education and Training counselor should not impose any path on a student, but rather guide them toward increased self-knowledge, positive coping mechanisms, and pursuing a career or further studies that meet their needs. In addition, feedback and monitoring strategies are given, both to receive and provide feedback as a VET advisor, as well as to monitor progress and/or performance. The next section, "Mentoring and Coaching Highly Sensitive People at Work: Strategies and Tools," gives an overview of the importance of HSP to the company. This chapter provides tips for managing highly sensitive employees, the reader can learn how management styles can be a factor supported by mentoring and coaching highly sensitive employees. This chapter is valuable for all types of managers in different companies and organizations, and for anyone working in collaboration with others.

We address the book primarily to professionals who deal with career counseling, career design on a daily basis, contribute to the creation of healthy workplaces. We address the book to both school counselors, experts of institutions supporting career design and also to representatives of HR departments. Given the content contained in it, the study can be useful for students of psychology, management, pedagogy and also highly sensitive people themselves. We realize that its fragments may be difficult to read in places, but we are confident that the knowledge and tips contained in it will pay off both in a fuller understanding of the essence of sensitivity and will help in the effective design of healthy workplaces.



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High sensitivity at work: the reason why it should be on an employer's agenda

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Abstract: Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) is a phenotypic trait that is characterized by deep information processing of the environment at cognitive, sensory, and emotional levels. Thus, SPS has a great influence on different life areas. The evidence from the research results clearly shows that for highly sensitive people the environment in which they develop is of particular importance. The purpose of the chapter is to present the importance of the trait for career development. The work can be used

Keywords: highly sensitive employee, high sensitivity, professional development, career management, positive psychology



1. Highly sensitive employee

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) is a characteristic that describes interpersonal differences to environmental stimuli. SPS is a phenotypic trait that is characterized by deep information processing of the environment at cognitive, sensory, and emotional levels (Acevedo et al., 2014; Aron & Aron, 1997; Greven et al., 2019; Pluess, 2015). Thus, SPS has a great influence on different life areas. One of these areas is professional work. People who are characterized by a high level of this trait are referred to as Highly Sensitive People (HSP).

High sensitivity is rarely mentioned among the characteristics of an effective employee or an effective leader. Highly sensitive people are commonly thought of as tearful, worrying, not brave and not very go-getting. They certainly don't "push with their elbows" and don't claim what they want. Does this mean that sensitive people are not good employees?

What comes to the fore is often confusing and shows only one side of the coin. What about the other side? What are highly sensitive employees like? What is their strong point? How to manage and support them? Can such individuals become effective leaders? Among other things, we will try to answer these questions in the following paragraphs of this chapter of the book.

Research on high sensitivity has been conducted for over 20 years (e.g. (Aron & Aron, 1997; Boyce & Ellis, 2005; Pluess, 2015), and their results show the potential of people with this trait. The causes and importance of sensitivity for years have been the object of interest of many researchers around the world. The common conclusion of studies, which often have different roots, is that highly sensitive people are a minority and that sensitivity is associated with higher reactivity to both negative and positive stimuli and experiences (Greven et al., 2019).

Based on the characteristics of the trait itself, as well as the research conducted so far (both qualitative and quantitative), it can be assumed that highly sensitive people are valuable, but underestimated employees. Their attention to detail, depth of processing, emotionality and empathy make them engaged, dedicated, creative and able to think outside the box. They are accurate, meticulous and responsible. The other side of this coin is lower resistance to stress and sensitivity to unfavorable working conditions. This chapter introduces the characteristics of the trait, but also shows how to deal with high sensitivity in professional life and use it as an asset.

Research shows that every fifth person you meet is a so-called highly sensitive person (HSP). Perhaps you are not even aware of it, and you also belong to this group? High sensitivity is related to the fact that the nervous system very carefully processes all information that reaches it. Colloquially, sensitivity is more often identified with weakness than with strength. Sensitivity, however, is not only about emotions, about moving, worrying, crying or reacting in fear. Highly sensitive people are particularly attentive, and their body reacts intensively to external stimuli (e.g. scratching tags, strong light, smells, changes in the environment) and internal (e.g. hunger, pain). Highly sensitive people are also attentive, conscientious and empathetic (Aron, 2013; Aron, Aron, & Jagiellowicz, 2012). So we can assume, from an



evolutionary point of view, that if this trait was not needed, socially useful, it probably wouldn't be present in humans.

2. Highly sensitive employee - sources of professional satisfaction exploration

According to the research carried out as part of the PRO-MOTION project¹, there are many stereotypes and misconceptions about the functioning of highly sensitive employees. In addition, there is surprising potential in the sensitivity itself. The aforementioned research is qualitative research (interviews and focus groups) conducted both with highly sensitive employees of various industries and professions as well as with employers (company owners, leaders, managers, directors of small and medium-sized enterprises as well as public and non-profit institutions). The research was carried out simultaneously in Poland, Spain, Portugal, Norway, Romania and Italy². Thanks to this, the factors determining professional satisfaction in the context of the work of highly sensitive people were explored.

The areas (themes) relating to professional satisfaction were distinguished and formulated. The areas /themes for category of employees and employers are listed in the table.

Table 1.1 *The areas relating to professional satisfaction of HSP – the perspective of the employee and the employer.*

Employee	Employer
The beliefs of high sensitivity	The beliefs of high sensitivity
The importance of sensitivity for the work performed	Targeting management style
Management	Motivating
Relations	Relations
Conditions	Physical working conditions
Practical implications for management	Implications for employee management

Opinions regarding beliefs about high sensitivity in the context of work, expressed by people participating in the interviews, indicated that high sensitivity of employees is sometimes perceived as a romantic and ideological disposition that characterizes young people. Respondents pointed out that, in their opinion, sensitivity is associated with high empathy and can be by some perceived as weakness. However, highly sensitive employees did not treat it in terms of a defect and something that interferes with life, although they paid attention to the feeling of being different. The employers pointed to the need to treat highly sensitive people in

¹ Read more about the project on the website: <https://promotion.wsei.eu/pl/>

In the PLATFORM tab, you can learn more about the professional potential resulting from sensitivity

² The exemplary descriptions in this paragraph refer to data obtained in research conducted in Poland



the management process in a individual way - "*if only they are arranged properly, they will be great employees*" and to shape social relations so as not to reject highly sensitive people who "*are thrown into the bag with some such grumblers, hypochondriacs, and generally there is a distance, there is a lot of distance*". The category most emphasized by employers and associated with the functioning of highly sensitive employees was stress and the expressed conviction about difficulties at work related to the perceived stress.

In the context of their work, the factor that turned out to be the strongest for people with high sensitivity was **strong emotionality**. Highly sensitive workers described it as an intense and strong experience of interaction with other people, responsibilities, tone of voice, everything. Another factor that stands out when it comes to the context of work is the need for highly sensitive people to create a **supportive climate**, most often described using the terms: mutual understanding, support, appreciation, respect, kindness and positive attitude. Another strongly emphasized was the **need to structure the tasks performed**. Highly sensitive employees indicated not so much the sheer number or difficulty of tasks as a potential problem for their own efficiency, but the lack of precision, clarity in defining tasks and responsibilities, and the lack of clear rules. Although overloading with tasks and all the impressions that highly sensitive people receive at work becomes a reason for them to "*switch off*" in a situation of perceived "*overload*". **Searching for external sources of confirmation** expressed as the need for feedback on the effects of work, not only after its completion but also during the "*finding if everything is okay*" is also strongly emphasized by highly sensitive employees.

Expectations of highly sensitive employees formulated in the field of management related primarily to the **need for independence and autonomy**, trust and permission for a large degree of freedom in performing the task. Again, there was a demand for communication – a strong **need for transparent communication** - and again it concerned primarily clarity as to the tasks set, the effects achieved and problem solving. The **ease of overload** resulting from the organization of work, the intensity of social relations as well as physical working conditions is an aspect that should be noticed in the sphere of management in the case of highly sensitive employees.

The dominant factor that emerged as a result of employee interviews was the great care for relationships. Respondents expressed it as "*the need for such direct contact with other people*". They emphasized that paying attention to the needs of others is "*the key to communicating, seeking for agreement*" and that high sensitivity helps to better "*understand and empathize*" with needs that others cannot express. Their expectations were also expressed as a postulate to "*treat employees more as people, and not as such machines to wind up the financial spiral*".

This was followed by **feeling of loneliness and misunderstanding** and again **importance of communication**. High sensitivity "*cannot always be seen as a 100% advantage*", "*there is a certain risk of being misunderstood*" or even "*treated as an inferior individual*".

When it comes to working **conditions**, the need for adequate work space was confirmed. Respondents referred to a number of elements shaping this space: sounds, smells, temperature, lighting, colors, traffic intensity. They had a negative attitude towards working in the so-called



open space - *"too many stimuli that occur in multi-person rooms at the same time for various types of tasks."* They value the opportunity to *"organize the workplace according to themselves"*.

The postulate most strongly emphasized by highly sensitive employees in terms of practical implications for management is **the dissemination of reliable and in-depth knowledge of high sensitivity**. This knowledge will be useful to employees - *"it is supposed to help me, so that this high sensitivity is not a crutch that will drag me to the bottom of life, spiritual and emotional, but ... will make me able to approach these tasks on my way with a greater inner resistance."* It will also be useful to superiors and employers - *"in these personnel decisions"* and *"to think about whether they have such friendly working conditions for such people"*, *"conditions that could be introduced by changing the work of these people, but most importantly, would allow to increase effectiveness and efficiency"*.

Strong emotional reactions in work were confirmed as the dominant factor to be considered when targeting management style for high sensitive employees by managers. Highly sensitive people *"pay attention to their own emotions, emotions of someone else, i.e. the boss"*, *"react very strongly to emotions that are in the group"*. Situations in which this emotional reaction is particularly visible in the opinion of employers are criticism - *"he does not take criticism well, because it is something that he will deal with in his head all the time, it will not let him sleep at night"*. Time pressure is also such a situation - *"under time pressure, he can't work"*, *"when he has time space, he does great"*. Employers also pointed that high sensitive people are **responsible** in their work, they have **single tasking preference** and **prospective orientation**, strengthened by the **need to make sense of the task**.

In the area of relations the high sensitive workers are perceived by employers as having **no go-ahead and expansive approach** but with **high social competences** driven by **importance of emotional climate** focused on **conflicts avoidance** and **excessive agreeableness**. *"I think that this highly sensitive one shows what he does and how he does to others as they should, because he won't come out and say it anyway"*. *"They function very well as a team. I think a quality like empathy is very helpful. They're also very supportive. They do not succumb to such outbursts of anger and frustration. They lead a positive emotional climate. They help us, the managers. they can keep their distance. Because they're empathetic, they're also supportive."*

Preferences regarding the place and physical conditions of work noticed by employers were consistent with those declared by employees. **Sensitivity to distractions** such as light, noise from telephones, conversations and human movement were cited as the most serious inconvenience. Hence, **work in open space** was indicated as causing **excessive overload**. Employers also indicated a clear **preference of consistency and order** and in case of unfavorable conditions **flexibility at the expense of their own comfort**.

Clear directions referring to managing high sensitive employees, which have been formulated by employers refer first to the need of **providing reliable knowledge on high sensitivity**. The respondents indicate that the appropriate management style in a given case is the **participatory style**, strongly oriented towards **respecting the needs** of the employee but also **towards the tasks**.



3. Sensitivity as a signature asset

“Choose a job you love and you'll never work a day more in your life” - Confucius

As we know from the studies conducted so far, high sensitivity is not a disorder or dysfunction. However, we know that HSP who grow up and develop in inappropriate, difficult and stressful conditions are more likely to experience psychological difficulties, such as depression, anxiety disorders, professional burnout (cf. Jaekel, Pluess, Belsky, & Wolke, 2015 ; Lionetti, Pluess, Aron, Aron, & Klein, 2019; Liss, Mailloux, & Erchull, 2008; Liss, Timmel, Baxley, & Killingsworth, 2005; Pluess & Boniwell, 2015). Interestingly, we also know that sensitivity can be perceived not only as a risk factor for difficulties, but also as a factor protecting proper development or special benefits related to the use of supportive and good conditions. It turns out, however, that what can be an advantage and benefit is often perceived as a "ball and chain". Not everyone can or is able to use the “advantage” of sensitivity in the same way. If we look at the results of the research described in the previous paragraph - sometimes it's not easy. In positive psychology, we talk about the so-called signature qualities (Seligman, 2004, 2006), i.e. what is most important, most developed in us, which proves us as people. Satisfaction with the work performed depends to a large extent on their use.

In the case of highly sensitive people, these advantages are related to the specific activity of the nervous system, including very accurate processing of incoming information. Frequent use at work of features related to sensitivity, such as sensitivity to nuances, subtleties, beauty, giving meaning to experiences, increases satisfaction with the activity performed. According to these assumptions, a person who is able to use their strengths is more likely to achieve high job satisfaction.

Sensitive people are endowed with potential and resources that enable them to understand themselves and others, in-depth analysis, empathy, careful decision-making, innovative and creative approach. However, their resources can only be used under the right conditions. In a favorable environment, work for vulnerable people can be more than a means to achieve earning goals. It can be a calling, dedication to work for its own sake. People for whom work is a calling find fulfillment in it, regardless of promotion or salary. They believe that their actions contribute to the common good, to something greater and more important than themselves.

Highly sensitive people more often find meaning in a good job, mainly due to the fact that this is what they need to live a full life.

4. Finding a friendly place to work

We already know that for highly sensitive people, the environment is of particular importance. Highly sensitive people are extremely attentive, and their body reacts intensively to both external and internal stimuli. This means that the overstimulated environment (and such are the so-called "open space") can be extremely tiring. By overstimulation we mean fatigue and stress. Intense artificial light, noise, conversations of co-workers, conflicts in the workplace, unpleasant, specific smells, desk arrangement or draft can be hard to bear. They are

more often disturbed by changes in the workplace and a large number of impulses (e.g. commands, conversations).

This does not mean that highly sensitive people are less open to experiences or challenges. We know from research that a high degree of sensitivity coexists with another personality trait, which is openness to experience. In addition, everyone is different and copes with the conditions in which they find themselves in a different way. The point is that a tendency to overstimulate can cause conflict avoidance or poor handling of disagreements in the workplace. In unfavorable conditions, behaviors in which a defect is seen may come to the fore. So if we look only at selected manifestations of sensitivity, we may hastily consider highly sensitive people as a burden for the company.

On the other hand, the characteristics related to sensitivity allow you to appreciate whether to fully benefit from a favorable environment. Highly sensitive people can be particularly effective, creative, creative and innovative in favorable conditions. They are usually committed and loyal employees. There is no prescription for a specific physical environment (such as the color of the walls), but there are certainly universal features that make it difficult to concentrate and favor faster fatigue. These include stimuli that affect all the senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste.

Overstimulation, depending on the person, may manifest itself in fatigue, lack of strength or even hyperactivity, unpleasant agitation, insomnia. Each manifestation of overstimulation leads to rest or to shutting down. A rested man who takes care of himself will be able to cope efficiently even in unfavorable conditions.

5. Benefits for the employer

Unfortunately, what is potential in sensitivity is often hidden or invisible at first glance. What comes to the fore is what is difficult, which is also a challenge for highly sensitive people. It is also true that high sensitivity is rarely mentioned among the characteristics of an effective employee. Completely wrong. As we know from the previous paragraphs, colloquially, sensitive people are described as tearful, worried, not brave and not very go-getting. They are rarely said to be uncompromising or getting their way.

This does not mean that highly sensitive people are not good employees. What appears at first glance can be misleading and shows only one side of the coin. Research on high sensitivity has been conducted for years, and their results show the potential of sensitivity. In Western literature, it is more and more often indicated that sensitivity gives an advantage, also on the labor market.

A sensitive employee is a person who usually makes careful decisions. At work, such person is thorough, conscientious, and often loyal. Due to deeper processing, highly sensitive people will remember more details and are also more aware of the long-term consequences of the decisions they make. They think about the future, try to do the best they can. This applies to the areas they care about.



Translating it into professional roles, this is an employee who effectively learns from his own experience. The natural empathy of sensitive people allows them to deal with other people's feelings. They quickly learn the expectations of the boss, try to adapt to the prevailing rules. If they think it makes sense, they won't break the rules.

Sensitivity is also associated with experiencing more or more intense emotions. It is these emotions that motivate the employee, cause to make every effort to meet the requirements of the superior, and what is more, not to make mistakes. To avoid the unpleasant emotions of missing deadlines, they try to plan tasks better. Due to the fact that what other people think is important to them, they take their duties seriously.

Frame:

The natural empathy of sensitive people allows them to deal with other people's feelings. They quickly learn the expectations of the leader, try to adapt to the prevailing rules. If they think it makes sense, they won't break the rules.

So the question arises why it is so difficult to see this potential. Highly sensitive people often lack clout, pugnacity, the ability to loudly praise themselves at work. Therefore, it can be tentatively assumed that it is self-presentation, and not the competences themselves, that can be a challenge. If we treat the skills in this area as a way to show our potential, use our own competences, live in harmony with ourselves and in accordance with our capabilities, then the acquisition of these skills can become a means to achieve personal goals.

It's not always pleasant for sensitive people. By nature, they tend not to draw attention to themselves, more often they pay attention to others. However, it is necessary to help people from the closest environment to see that one man contains sensitivity, courage and determination. The conditions for development consist in tackling tasks that are not always pleasant. As with any activity, its repetition, training, makes it easier for us.

6. Conditions and attention to needs

If we already know what are the potential benefits of employing highly sensitive people, let's move on to whether it is worth investing in conditions that are adequate for the development of opportunities. Therefore, it is worth answering the question whether those conditions that are particularly favorable for highly sensitive people can also be beneficial for less sensitive employees.

In a work culture where results, making indicators, meeting deadlines are important, less attention is paid to the human being. People also pay less attention to each other. Stress, its intensity, translates into numerous diseases, hormonal disorders appear more and more often, the body defends itself against overload. These are particularly unfavorable conditions for highly sensitive people. Management models that come to us from the west more and more

often show that a noticed and satisfied employee will be more effective, loyal and will be able to engage in the duties entrusted to him.

In many cultures, the myth of working effectively under pressure is still widespread, that the employee must be supervised and checked at every step. It is also often repeated metaphors that people need to be "pressed" or "adjusted" to work better. There's a lot of cruelty in this. Sensitive people function much better, are more efficient, also in solving tasks and problems when they have space. When, within reasonable limits, they themselves decide about the order of the tasks they perform. Some highly sensitive people indicate that they felt job satisfaction only when they started working "on their own".

Just as for highly sensitive children, behavioral methods such as setting a stopwatch so that the child completes the task at that time are not very effective - they increase anxiety and cause chaos in action - the same "pressed" sensitive employee will use energy to cope with the emotions that accompany him during this time, and not for creative, constructive and conscientious work.

So, what can be effective? Our research confirmed that the features essential for highly sensitive people, such as emotional reaction, empathy, the danger of overloading, strongly affect them in their professional work. The analysis of the content of the interviews with highly sensitive employees allows for the initial formulation of key areas of recommendation that can be introduced in the workplace.

1. First is an element of job design. For these autonomous, independent and responsible employees, it is especially important to clearly define and prioritize the tasks they are supposed to perform. Tasks should be planned in advance to reduce the element of surprise and allow time for preparation. Deployment planning should take into account time resources to eliminate rush, chaos and overload. Highly sensitive people will launch their assets if they have a sense of the tasks being carried out and their location in a long-term, strategic perspective. Then they will be able to analyze the process, see the consequences and prevent problems. Therefore, they need high-quality communication with their supervisor and colleagues.
2. They should be treated as partners and not just recipients of orders, despite the differences in the official relationship. Open discussion and systematic exchange of feedback can be the basis of their success. A good match will be a supervisor who represents a participatory but also task-oriented style. Supervisor attentive enough to be able to pay attention to such needs as favorable physical working conditions (limiting the number of stimuli) and shaping positive social relations (constructive approach to problems, constructive conversation and not judgment). If employers are to support highly sensitive people at the workplace they may need also to verify some of their HR processes and how they are tuned e.g. focus and job evaluation criteria. Certainly, it will be necessary to verify to what extent the management staff is able to support such people, and this may mean examining not only the management style, but also elements that are difficult to grasp and change, such as the culture of the organization, among others acceptance of diversity, respect for the well-being of employees.



3. The well-being of the workforce has an impact on employee and organizational performance. Understanding the needs of approximately 20% of the population in the sphere of their professional life cannot be underestimated. Awareness of such elements as the personality traits of highly sensitive people, the characteristics of their workplace/environment and the interaction between the two can create conditions in which they will perform at their best.

However, the conditions are not only the place, the physical environment - it is also (and perhaps above all) people, co-workers. If we have unfavorable people around us, people who don't understand, who find it difficult to accept what they don't understand, the conditions will be as burdensome as the overcast physical conditions. If you are surrounded by co-workers who are rigid in their views, principled in action, or aggressive in their manners, the workplace can be a particularly difficult one. Going to work will be associated with increased stress, somatic pain, and lower efficiency.

Our experience with sensitivity research conducted over the last few years is that only highly sensitive people are interested in the well-being of highly sensitive people (including at work). This is a barrier worth working on. Disenchantment of the myth of oversensitivity, maladjustment, tearfulness, hypersensitivity is one of the steps towards improving the quality of professional functioning and, as a result, the quality of life. Sensitivity is an important temperament trait, not a dysfunctional one. Does not require special treatment. No labeling or spotlights required. It is reliable knowledge about effective methods of support.

SUMMARY

High sensitivity is associated with the risk of psychological difficulties and stress-related problems when a person grows up, is brought up and stays in inappropriate, negative conditions and environment. In addition, this feature is associated with special benefits (e.g. positive mood, greater awareness) when a person grows up, is brought up and stays in positive conditions/environment. Environmental sensitivity researcher Michael Pluess writes about Vantage sensitivity, about the sensitivity that gives an advantage.

Work on environmental sensitivity highlights that sensory processing sensitivity is important not only for understanding maladjustment, difficulties, or the risk of later difficulties, but also for understanding optimal development or even a particular development of potential in a positive environment. So what are the benefits of a highly sensitive worker?

1. They care! Highly sensitive people will make every effort to perform the task entrusted to them very well, and preferably flawlessly. The time they spend on tasks translates into their quality. Moreover, according to the latest research, a good leader must be involved. A committed leader builds employees' motivation, a committed employee puts effort into the tasks performed and is convinced of their rightness.



2. They make decisions carefully. Due to deep processing, highly sensitive employees are aware of the seriousness of the situation. They try to get the information they need to make decisions. They try to make decisions based on a full picture of the situation and a broader context. Greater awareness of consequences contributes to prudent choices. As a result, decisions are well thought out and take longer to avoid mistakes related to hasty action.

3. They are innovative and creative! Innovations are created at the intersection of fields. The ability to combine information, notice nuances, pay attention to details creates great creative potential. Sensitive people are also more creative. Research confirms that sensitivity is the most important temperament trait predicting higher creativity. Studies conducted in a group of highly sensitive children indicate the correlation of the trait with multiple talents. In addition, many aspects of sensitivity are related to and translated into giftedness

4. They know people! They are empathetic and attentive to others. The ability to empathize favors the development of the so-called soft skills. Highly sensitive people are attentive to others, they try to understand the other person. Emotional compassion makes them happy when they make others happy. On the other hand, the idea that they may disappoint someone can be so difficult that they try to avoid conflict situations. Moreover, they are people you can count on. Research shows that sensitive children have more constructive moral attitudes, higher social competences, and a higher level of self-regulation. In adult, professional life, this can translate into kindness, loyalty, self-control, competence in communication and cooperation. Social competence is closely related to professional success, not only in occupations related to helping others.

5. They are development oriented. Highly sensitive people especially thrive in good conditions. Loud, open spaces, chaotic, conflicting work environment can be very difficult for sensitive people, causing fatigue and stress. However, a favorable, supportive environment allows highly sensitive people to develop their unique potential. In studies conducted in a group of children, an analogy with flowers is used, comparing highly sensitive children to orchids, and their less sensitive peers to dandelions. The orchid occurs and blooms less often, it is unusual and delicate, it needs special conditions. Dandelion is more resistant, but hardly anyone makes the effort to take advantage of its beauty. Highly sensitive people use the support offered more effectively, they make good use of the opportunities and possibilities given to them.

6. They can be effective leaders. Sensitive people look for the best solutions, analyzing the problem from every angle, they approach people with empathy, they can look from different perspectives. They are unlikely to accept the role of an uncompromising leader who aggressively pursues his goals. However, their commitment, readiness to sacrifice, often humility, determination and consistency may provide conditions for effective implementation of goals in a less typical way. Attention to small hints, nuances, can give an advantage in business.

It takes willingness to see the potential of high sensitivity. Difficulties experienced by highly sensitive people in adverse conditions may come to the fore. However, noticing the second plan gives the employer (and the employee himself) huge benefits. Sensitivity is one of the features



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that make us human, and attention to others and careful observation of the surrounding reality are important factors of civilization progress.



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Identification of High Sensitivity in Career Design and at Work Management

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Highly sensitive people are characterized by an intense cognitive, sensory, and emotional processing of environmental and internal stimuli. These characteristics are quite relevant in in career design, career counseling and work settings. This chapter discusses the main areas in which high sensitivity tends to be manifested, and some of the psychometric instruments used to identify it. Then, characteristics of highly sensitive children are analyzed, highlighting those aspects that favor better integration and adaptation in educational settings, given the importance of teacher understanding of this concept to adapt their educational interventions to the needs of this population. Finally, the strengths of highly sensitive individuals in work environments are described, revealing their potential positive influence on businesses, work environments, and colleague interactions. The chapter describes many studies and although it may be difficult due to its scientific nature, it is important to familiarize yourself with the current knowledge about the issue.

Keywords: high sensitivity, assessment, environmental sensitivity, sensory processing
Sensitivity, research



1. Identification of high sensitivity

First, to better understand the issue of high sensitivity and the need to identify it, we will present selected studies that are important for the development of this area. The first chapter presented the characteristics of the trait, and this one will attempt to explain why it is important to analyze its intensity in the context of work. As you know, Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) is a personality trait characterized by the ability to register and process internal and external stimuli based on environmental experiences, more intensely and deeply than others (Greven et al., 2019; Pluess, 2015). Thus, SPS may be defined as a continuum representing individual differences in the response to internal and environmental information (Aron & Aron, 1997; Greven et al., 2019; Pluess, 2015). As for external physical stimuli, highly sensitive persons (HSP) can perceive subtle stimuli such as mild odors, minor changes in voice tone, or small gestures. Regarding internal physical reactivity, studies have confirmed that HSP tend to pay more attention to perceived interoceptive stimuli, increasing their sensory fatigue and the development of more frequent and intense bodily sensations (Acevedo, 2020). Although potentially constituting a risk factor, individuals with this exceptionally developed sensory perception (Aron, 2020) may receive protective benefits from the same, especially in hostile environments (Jagiellowicz et al., 2020).

Let's try to look at the way the trait manifests itself in various spheres of human functioning. On a cognitive level, HSP tend to display certain characteristics, such as cognitive inflexibility, cognitive overload, deep cognitive processing, perfectionism, and a sense of fear and/or anxiety (Weyn et al., 2019). However, these individuals have also been found to perform intense information processing, perceiving subtleties and memorizing numerous details of observed situations and elements (Aron & Aron, 1997; Jagiellowicz et al., 2020). Thus, they may be highly creative, having a rich imagination and high reflective capacity (Jagiellowicz et al., 2020). Many authors have suggested that not only are HSP profound thinkers, good decision-makers, and spiritually-oriented, but they also tend to be talented, mystical, and intuitive (Aron, 2020; Aron & Aron, 1997).

Sequentially, the emotional area is associated with profound experience, intense expression, the somatic manifestation of emotions, high stress levels, attachment to objects, and emotional interactions with animals, art, and nature (Greven et al., 2019). HSP tend to demonstrate positive emotional aspects, displaying an intelligent sense of humor, intense feelings and emotions, and high levels of empathy and sensitivity towards others (Aron, 2020).

As for social relations, they are often strongly influenced by their environment. At times, they lack the communicative skills necessary to satisfy their needs and they may have more difficulty in adapting to new situations and people. However, in positive and supportive environments, HSP tend to attain high levels of social competence and resilience (Jagiellowicz et al., 2020).

In summary, in physical aspects, HSP display a high perceptual level, an increased awareness of adverse environmental elements, and a precise perception of sensory, olfactory, auditory, and visual stimuli. Emotionally, they tend to be empathetic toward the feelings of

others and demonstrate high levels of self-regulation in favorable environments. They are highly creative and have a great reflexive capacity. On an interpersonal level, they are quite resilient and have high levels of social competence.

Given the diverse characteristics of HSP, researchers have faced difficulties in terms of its assessment, which requires a complex personality breakdown. Many theorists of high sensitivity have devoted their work to the assessment of this personality trait, with a number of instruments having been proposed for the same. The most relevant and widely used of these instruments are described below.

In the next part of the chapter, we will present scales for measuring sensitivity for high school students and adults. There are also tools for children, but they are not the subject of this chapter. Aron and Aron (1997) developed the Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS) as a self-reporting measure to assess SPS in the adult population. The HSPS consists of 27 items assessed with a Likert-like scale made up of 7 response options, to analyze emotional and cognitive aspects of this personality trait. The items making up this instrument include questions such as: Are you aware of the subtleties of your environment? Are you affected by the mood of others? Do loud noises make you uncomfortable? The HSPS has been translated into various languages including German, Norwegian, Icelandic, Chinese, Swedish, Japanese, Spanish, French, Polish, Persian, Turkish, and South African.

Prior studies have offered evidence to increase the understanding of this sensitivity, not only as a one-dimensional construct, but as a multi-dimensional one (Smith et al., 2019). Using factorial structure analysis, some authors have described two (negative emotionality and focus on sensitivity; Evans & Rothbart, 2008), three (low sensory threshold, ease of excitation, and aesthetic sensitivity; Smolewska et al., 2006), and four dimensions (general sensitivity/overstimulation, adverse reactions to strong sensitivity, psychological discrimination, and avoidance of controlled pain; Meyer et al., 2005). If you want to use the HSP scale at work - look for a national adaptation that will have proven psychometric properties (i.e. it will be verified, properly prepared and adapted to cultural differences).

Based on the adult HSPS, the Highly Sensitive Child Scale (HSCS), with its 12 items (with a revised version of 21 items), is a measure used to assess sensitivity in children. Although the name of the scale says that it is intended for children, it is also used in the group of teenagers, therefore the age of the tests is 8-18 years. This means that the scale can also be used by career counselors to assess the severity of students' sensitivity. Various studies have supported the optimal psychometric properties of the HSPS (Pluess et al., 2018; Weyn et al., 2019). Psychometric analyses suggest that this instrument consists of the following three dimensions: 1. Low sensory threshold (LST), or sensitivity to subtle and external stimuli; 2. Ease of excitation (EOE) or being easily overwhelmed by internal or external stimuli; 3. Aesthetic sensitivity (AES), or the ability to obtain pleasure from aesthetic experiences and positive stimuli (Pluess et al., 2018; Smolewska et al., 2006). The HSCS has also been culturally adapted in distinct languages such as Belgian, Croatian, Japanese, Chinese, Polish, and Spanish. Table 1 presents the main psychometric characteristics of the previously described SPS assessment instruments.



High sensitivity is a personality trait found in approximately 20% of the population (Aron, 2020). This high prevalence suggests the immediate need for tools that can identify HSP in distinct life contexts such as work environments. After this general introduction, which focuses on HSP identification and characteristics, the next sections will consider HSP in the contexts of education and work.

Table 1. *Summary of the main psychometric characteristics of the SPS assessment instruments.*

	No. of items	Population	Language	Dimensions	Reliability	Factorial analysis
HSPS (Aron & Aron, 1997)	27 items Likert-like scale with 7 options	Adult	English	1 general factor	$\alpha = 0.87$	EFA
HSCS (Pluess et al., 2018)	12 items Likert-like scale with 7 options	Children and adolescents (aged 8 to 19)	English	1 general factor (GF) and 3 dimensions: LST, EOE and AES	GF: $\alpha = 0.79$ LST: $\alpha = 0.66$ EOE: $\alpha = 0.81$ AES: $\alpha = 0.73$	EFA CFA
HSC Rating Scale (Lionetti et al., 2019)	10 rating scales Likert-like scale with 7 options	Children (aged 3 to 5)	English	1 general factor	-	EFA CFA
HSPS (Aron, 2002; Boterberg & Warreyn, 2016)	23 items Likert-like scale with 5 options	Children and adolescents (aged 3 to 16)	Dutch	1 general factor (GF) and 2 dimensions: OS and DP	GF: $\alpha = 0.89$ OS: $\alpha = 0.86$ DP: $\alpha = 0.85$	EFA CFA



2. High sensitivity and education and career counseling

Within the area of education, studies on the relationship between characteristics of the educational setting and sensitivity indicate that the quality of the environment in which children grow up is especially relevant (Greven et al., 2019). Children having a positive educational experience and good interactions with their teachers are found to demonstrate better emotional self-regulation and improved social skill development, both with their peers and adults (Skibbe et al., 2011), as well as good behavior and academic performance. Past studies have shown that highly sensitive individuals are more intensely affected by positive and negative experiences as compared to those with average or low sensitivity (Aron, 2020). Environmental quality also appears to affect the support provided by educators to the children's development and education (Marshall, 2004).

Highly Sensitive Students (HSS) are characterized as being reactive, creative, intuitive, attentive to the mood of others, easily frustrated, precise, perfectionists, disciplined, susceptible to working under pressure or observation, having the tendency to observe first and act later, and being especially skillful and displaying a good sense of humor (Rinn et al., 2018). If educational interventions are inappropriate, HSS are more prone to stress, displaying shy and inhibited behavior, and having a more difficult time accepting environmental changes (Lionetti et al., 2022). At times, they are less likely to participate in everyday school activities, demonstrating lower levels of enjoyment of these. Games and school activities are important for children and their ability to participate in these activities is the foundation of their development. HSS may have difficulties in responding appropriately and adapting to different sensory information during the activities, negatively affecting their participation and, ultimately, their development.

For this reason, teachers may perceive HSC as having a dysfunction or deficit and may be unsure of how to behave with them. Children who react differently than their peers may be a cause of concern and worry due to their inability to cope with their reality. However, high sensitivity should be viewed as an individual resource or advantage for children (Belsky & Pluess, 2009), albeit one that requires appropriate support conditions.

A retrospective study is ideal to obtain a vision of adult HSP based on childhood educational experiences, identifying diverse facets, and their perceived consequences. Distinct studies using this methodology with adult HSP have reported that when deficits exist in the educational environment, these individuals tend to be more likely to display shyness, anxiety, and depression (Liss et al., 2005), whereas positive teacher behavior, such as understanding and empathy, has been shown to be beneficial. An adverse environment may also lead to adverse emotions being experienced later in their adult life (Tillman et al., 2019).

Aron (2020) affirmed that, under favorable conditions, HSS may receive greater benefits from the teaching-learning process than their less sensitive peers. It has been demonstrated that, in a favorable environment, HSC may demonstrate better performance than their peers: receiving better grades in school, having more constructive moral attitudes, and higher social competence and self-regulation levels (Aron, 2020).



Given that the quality of the immediate educational environment appears to be an essential issue for highly sensitive children, appropriate conditions should be guaranteed to promote optimal emotional, social and cognitive development, and to achieve optimal performance.

Therefore, teacher, career counselors and educator training is fundamental to improve competences, knowledge, and skills regarding high sensitivity, to create favorable conditions that stimulate the development of these children. Of the competences to be developed, Gaś (2006) mentioned the following: self-awareness and understanding of one’s value system to better understand student behavior and to express an understanding of these children through active listening; awareness and expression of emotions and feelings; the ability to ensure student safety in difficult situations, offering them support and constructively intervening as necessary; offering students constructive behavior models; showing empathy and interest in others; having clear ethical principles and a sense of responsibility; and the ability to promote positive action and behavior changes through appropriate problem solving and decision making.

It is important for teachers to learn to quickly detect this trait that characterizes some of their students and to help them develop in four key areas: the development of self-esteem, a decreased sense of embarrassment, discipline, and skilled self-recognition of this sensitivity (Aron, 2020).

As previously mentioned, self-esteem must be encouraged in these students so that they can appropriately manage the frustration created by the educational environment, one of the biggest challenges of this population. Therefore, it is necessary to make sure that these students are not excluded from the group when they participate in group or partner activities. It is also important to explain high sensitivity to the other students, so that they can better understand individuals with this trait, accompanying them in their process and taking advantage of the benefits of having highly sensitive peers.

It is also important for HSS to learn to accept themselves. To encourage this, teachers, career counselors must ensure that these children do not feel different from others. HSS need to understand and accept themselves and this may be accomplished by showing them their strengths, which include their empathy, creativity, talents, ability to help others, knowledge of the feelings of others, ability to reflect and to feel happiness and enthusiasm for small things, etc. Table 2 offers a schematic presentation of some basic recommendations and motivations that may help teachers with HSS.

Table 2. *Basic recommendations for teachers and career counselors of HSS.*

Recommendations	Motivation
Carefully listening to students	Knowing their needs and interests
Respecting their learning rhythms	Taking into account their sensitivity and encouraging their strengths



Breaking down the tasks into other smaller ones	Motivating in small achievements, valuing all progress
Understanding, promoting, and valuing their abilities	Improving their self-esteem and emotional regulation
Learning based on open methodologies (projects, collaborative, etc.)	Promoting and helping them to have good organization of thought
Promoting an environment of trust with others	Improving relationships and social skills
Allow to go outside of class or engage in open-air	Break from over-stimulation activities
Situate in calm places with a favorable environment	Avoiding adverse sensory stimuli

3. High sensitivity and work

The current model of companies and organizations in the work environment is constantly evolving. There is an increasing need for more intuitive, creative, and sensitive individuals who are capable of anticipating the needs of society and the labor environment. Regarding work, HSP display a series of characteristics which, if suitably understood, may be quite useful, not only to the company but also to the other workers, potentially improving the work climate and environment. The main characteristics of HSP in the labor setting have been described in an earlier chapter of this manual.

Recent studies have focused on the role of HSP in distinct labor settings. Schmitt (2022) examined the role of SPS as a predictor of proactive labor behavior in a broad sample of workers. The results suggest that some of the SPS dimensions, specifically, low sensory threshold (LST), are negatively related to personal initiative, whereas aesthetic sensitivity (AES) is positively related to proactivity and personal initiative in the workplace. Furthermore, work complexity is positively related to proactivity in the case of employees with a high AES level, but this is not the case for those having a low level (Schmitt, 2022).

A recent review (Cadogan et al., 2022) identified six studies that directly consider the role of SPS in the labor setting. Evers et al. (2008) found that the values of SPS correlate negatively with the sense of coherence, understandability, direction, and self-efficacy; and they correspond positively with negative emotionality, displeasure in the workplace, and the need for rest and recovery. Vander-Elst et al. (2019) analyzed a total of 1019 Belgian employees, and found that ease of excitation (EOE) and a low sensory threshold (LST) increased the relationship between work demands and emotional exhaustion. Another study by Stefan Lindsay (2017) considering teachers with SPS demonstrated that the values in this variable



correlate significantly and positively with the risk of burnout, although this relationship is mediated by stress level. Teachers having a higher level of SPS had a greater risk of burnout, due to their increased levels of emotional fatigue. The main sources of work stress identified were time demands, as well as interaction with colleagues. A recent study considering dentists also revealed the existence of positive correlations between SPS levels and burnout, as well as stress and work satisfaction (Meyerson et al., 2020). Similar results have been found in the healthcare population in fields such as nursing (Redfearn et al., 2020), and in cases in which these workers engaged in highly stressful situations such as the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pérez-Chacón et al., 2021).

Furthermore, highly sensitive teachers appear to be more in sync with students facing difficulties, with great importance being placed on the type of coping strategies used to regulate labor-related stress (Tillmann, 2019). In this study, it was also found that highly sensitive teachers benefited more from therapeutic interventions than less sensitive teachers (Tillmann, 2019). To conclude, in a favorable work environment and climate, HSP tend to be very creative and are very good at finding solutions to difficult situations. They tend to generate new ideas, express innovative thoughts, and develop them for the benefit of others. Furthermore, their ability to understand others makes them excellent caregivers and instructors, providing solutions to problems, assuming that they are not over-pressured.

Therefore, and given the proposal by Aron (2002), it is important to consider certain aspects when supervising HSP, such as: promoting a good working environment with colleagues based on mutual support and assistance; physically placing the HSP as far as possible from excess adverse sensory stimuli; having the most flexible possible work schedule which includes rest periods, even short ones, to promote their personal regulation and offer them sufficient free time to maintain a physical, emotional and mental balance; their work organization and procedures should be clear; they should find sense in what they are doing and discover what they can offer, while simultaneously feeling valued and respected in their work, without excess competitiveness, and in a collaborative setting; they should feel accomplished in their work and it should be in line with their values.

Conclusion

This chapter has described some of the main characteristics of HSP in the education and work environments. It is clearly important for both educators, employers, supervisors, and human resources managers to understand how HSP respond in physical, emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal areas. In educational settings, this will permit the adaptation of the teaching-learning processes, while also offering teachers the needed tools to help students appropriately process and manage the potential difficulties that they may encounter. It is important to consider high sensitivity as a student strength and resource, and not a deficit or difficulty. Thus, interventions carried out by teachers that normalize the children's feelings and promote certain means of performing tasks and activities are necessary and highly useful. Finally, the characteristics of HSP may be a central resource in the workplace, assuming that they are adequately considered. Commitment, perfectionism, creativity, teamwork, and responsibility of these individuals may be important skills that will improve the company's work climate.



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Moreover, the ability to adapt specific labor aspects such as environmental noise, temperature, or work methods may help HSP to improve their performance and their overall quality of life in the workplace.



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Environmental Sensitivity in Career Development through the Lens of Calling, Meaning, and Volition

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Abstract

This chapter explores calling, meaning, and volition through the lens of environmental sensitivity in career development, emphasising its relevance to Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs). It highlights how the unique characteristics of HSPs - deep processing, heightened empathy and sensitivity - shape their career paths and satisfaction. The chapter emphasises the importance of adapting work environments to individual sensitivities to enhance job satisfaction, performance and well-being. Through a transdisciplinary review, it offers evidence-based recommendations for practitioners to promote supportive and fulfilling career coaching, counselling, and work contexts for HSPs.

Keywords: career management; environmental sensitivity; sensory processing sensitivity; calling; meaning; volition

1. Introduction

The concept of environmental sensitivity has emerged as a central framework for understanding individual differences in response to environmental stimuli, both positive and negative. This sensitivity is not simply a passive response but reflects a complex interplay between genetic predispositions and life experiences that influence how individuals perceive, process, and respond to their environment (Pluess, 2015). In the context of career development and counselling, environmental sensitivity offers a nuanced lens through which to view individual career paths, highlighting the importance of aligning work environments with individual sensitivities to promote job satisfaction, performance, and overall well-being.

Environmental sensitivity is characterised by heightened perceptual and cognitive processing of sensory input, resulting in deeper emotional responses to environmental stimuli.

This heightened sensitivity is underpinned by neurobiological mechanisms within the central nervous system, with research identifying specific brain regions, such as the amygdala and hippocampus, that are associated with sensitivity (Acevedo et al., 2014). Such sensitivity is thought to have both genetic and experiential roots, to be shaped throughout an individual's development, and to be influenced by interactions between genetic predispositions and environmental factors (Assary et al., 2021; Keers & Pluess, 2017; Pluess et al., 2023).

In vocational and organisational psychology, as well as in career coaching and counselling practices, the importance of environmental sensitivity is particularly salient. The work environment, with its myriad stimuli, can have a significant impact on individuals, especially those with high sensitivity. For highly sensitive persons (HSPs), the alignment of personal values with their work and the presence of a fulfilling calling are critical to their well-being and job satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2014; Duffy et al., 2016a; Duffy et al., 2018). The concepts of calling, meaningful work, and volition are intertwined with environmental sensitivity, suggesting that career counselling for highly sensitive individuals should consider not only the traditional aspects of career choice, but also the deep-seated need for meaningful and volitionally chosen work that aligns with their heightened environmental sensitivity.

Through an integrative and transdisciplinary review, we explore the integration of environmental sensitivity with the concepts of vocation, meaning and volition in career development and counselling. By examining the emerging research, theory and practice implications arising from these interrelated constructs, we will provide evidence-based recommendations for practitioners working with highly sensitive persons. The aim is to improve understanding of how environmental sensitivity can inform career counselling and coaching practice and ultimately benefit HSPs in their career management and development.

We chose a transdisciplinary approach because relying solely on an academic focus on field studies may not effectively translate research findings into real-world applications. Despite the ongoing need for research to underpin our work, our initiative demanded immediate, actionable solutions. We also realised that concentrating solely on studies of sensory processing sensitivity in the workplace resulted in a cyclical pattern of revisiting the same ideas, much like a hamster endlessly running on its wheel in a cage. It was imperative to transcend the boundaries between disciplines, between theory and practice, and between different professions and expertise.

The opposite problem, which characterises the world of practice instead, is that it often focuses on an overly specific solution and loses sight of the broader scenario. This narrow focus can lead to a paradox where solutions to immediate problems inadvertently give rise to more significant, long-term problems.

Bringing together academic insights and practical applications through a transdisciplinary lens is therefore crucial to avoiding these pitfalls and avoiding an over-reliance on theory.

On the practical side, our team, drawn from different countries and academic disciplines with a common interest in wellbeing and flourishing, engaged with a diverse group of stakeholders, including managers, HR professionals, employees, coaches and counsellors through focus groups. This effort fostered a more accessible language, paved the way for new



questions, and created a shared understanding that was critical to our goals. And, indeed, the concepts of calling, meaning and volition emerged as central themes in our focus group discussions. These sessions involved HR professionals, managers, supervisors, coaches and counsellors, as well as a diverse group of employees across Europe, highlighting the universal relevance and importance of these concepts in the workplace.

This collaborative effort extended to the creation of thematic podcasts, highlighting the need for a common language across disciplines and between researchers and practitioners.

In parallel, we formed task-oriented teams focused on the rapid collection and organisation of evidence, furthering our goal of practical application. In career management, coaching and HR, the emphasis on calling, meaning and volition has undeniably enriched our understanding of workplace fulfilment and employee engagement. However, this focus risks overestimating the benefits and underestimating the potential drawbacks, in particular for highly sensitive persons. Trends can be interpreted in different ways, and without a deep understanding of their underlying principles, there is a risk that they will be implemented in ways that don't deliver the intended results. Trends often suggest generalised strategies that may not be universally applicable across different sectors, cultures or individual needs. What works well in one context may not translate effectively in another, leading to misapplied practices and policies.

A further step towards the tangible application of our transdisciplinary approach was the establishment of applied research partnerships with companies and professionals. This collaboration aimed to address the needs of the wider industrial ecosystem, rather than isolated company issues.

These strategies - enhancing mutual understanding between researchers, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and engaging in transdisciplinary activities - outline our method for integrating this approach into corporate settings, emphasising the management of careers sensitive to environmental stimuli.

In addition, the Sensitive Career Management initiative underlines the crucial role of training programmes for professionals in vocational settings and companies of different sizes. While larger companies may have advanced innovations in career management, they may overlook the nuances of sensory sensitivity and diversity management. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), on the other hand, often face a lack of resources and expertise. Our aim is to equip them with both knowledge and practical tools.

Furthermore, our project is based on three fundamental commitments: Learning, which focuses on the training of managers; Dissemination, which is dedicated to sharing results with a wide audience, including researchers, practitioners, and the general public; and Impact, which aims to have a significant, tangible impact on businesses and communities.

Currently, our educational offerings include lectures, workshops, case studies and nanolearning, with a focus on environmental awareness and career management and development. These materials and activities are drawn from our ongoing work with companies and practitioners (Human Resources professionals, coaches, consultants, educators, and

trainers). These activities challenge participants to engage closely with the realities of career management, coaching and counselling for HSPs, and foster a deeper understanding and practical skills in these areas.

2. Theoretical framework and emerging perspectives

The understanding of environmental sensitivity is emerging as a central framework that is reshaping career development and counselling. This concept, broadly defined, captures individual differences in responsiveness to environmental stimuli, both positive and negative. Central to this discourse is the recognition that environmental sensitivity significantly influences career trajectories, necessitating a deeper exploration of its implications in vocational and work settings. The environmental sensitivity framework posits that individuals vary in their perceptual and cognitive processing of environmental inputs, a variability rooted in neurobiological mechanisms (Ellis et al., 2011; Pluess, 2015; Pluess et al., 2023). This sensitivity is not simply a static trait but evolves through the interplay of genetic predispositions and environmental experiences from the prenatal period through the life course (Pluess & Belsky, 2011).

Navigating career pathways is increasingly complex in today's dynamic work environment, characterised by constant change and challenges that test individuals' skills and ability to envision their professional futures (Savickas et al., 2009; Kenny et al., 2024). In response to this complex landscape, new theories and intervention strategies have been developed to help individuals understand their career contexts.

Recent studies have broadened the scope of vocational and organisational psychology to include eudaimonic aspects of well-being, such as personal growth, meaningfulness and altruism, which provide a foundation for human flourishing (Ryff & Singer, 1998). These dimensions offer a more nuanced understanding of work satisfaction beyond traditional measures, emphasising the role of work in contributing to a sense of purpose, happiness, self-worth, success, personal development or meaning.

Career construction theory (CCT) suggests that individuals construct their career paths by imbuing their experiences with personal meaning (Savickas, 2013). This approach focuses on the subjective dimensions of careers, viewing them as constructs that interpret past, present and future experiences through the lens of meaning. Therefore, the act of career construction involves assigning meaning to one's experiences, suggesting that the career development journey is supported by various personal resources that enable individuals to navigate potential future obstacles. Career calling, meaning and volition are among these resources.

The relevance of environmental sensitivity to career development is particularly evident in the context of calling, meaning, and volition. These constructs can provide a rich tapestry for understanding how highly sensitive persons navigate their career paths.

Research indicates that the transition from academic life to professional employment is influenced by specific socio-demographic and individual factors. Similar influences are observed during career transitions. However, beyond these factors, psychological resources play a crucial role in easing these transitions, with the concept of a career calling being one of these key resources. The concept of calling in work varies, but generally refers to a sense of purpose that drives an individual towards work that is both personally fulfilling and socially meaningful, possibly including spiritual, passionate or altruistic elements. There is considerable overlap between this concept and meaningful work, which is characterised by an understanding of the impact of work and a sense that it is significant and worthwhile. The distinction between calling and meaningful work can sometimes be blurred, but meaningful work is often considered the broader term, with calling being a specific type of meaningful engagement (Dik & Duffy, 2015; Duffy et al., 2016a). A calling takes on heightened significance for HSPs. Their deep processing capacities make them particularly adept at aligning personal values with vocational pursuits, highlighting the importance of career counselling and coaching tailored to their unique needs.

Similarly, the pursuit of meaningful work, characterised by an understanding of one's contribution as significant and worthwhile, resonates deeply with sensitive individuals. Their heightened perceptual acuity enables them to seek roles that not only align with their values, but also provide a deep sense of accomplishment and contribution. This search is further nuanced by the concept of work volition.

Work volition, a concept that emerges from the psychology of working perspective (Blustein, 2006), recognises the constraints that many face when making career choices. It is typically seen as essential to experiencing a calling or finding work meaningful, suggesting that a sense of autonomy in career decision-making increases the likelihood of these experiences (Allan et al., 2016; Duffy et al., 2016b). For highly sensitive persons, work volition is crucial as it enables them to navigate their work environments in ways that mitigate sensory and emotional overstimulation (Allan et al., 2016).

Major career development theories have indirectly addressed these issues, each offering strategies to help individuals discover or create fulfilling work environments. These range from matching personal strengths with work environments, enacting one's occupational identity, understanding the interplay of personal, behavioural, and environmental factors, constructing meaningful career narratives, and achieving work fulfilment through decent work and autonomy (Chen, 2001; Dik & Duffy, 2015; Hansen, 2013; Hartung & Taber, 2013; Lent, 2013).

Adding a new perspective, recent findings on sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) have provided valuable insights into how individual differences affect work experiences and influence engagement, satisfaction, and well-being (Golonka & Gulla, 2021; Schmitt, 2022; Vieregge et al., 2023, among the others).

The interplay of calling, meaning, and volition within the framework of environmental sensitivity provides a compelling lens through which to view the career development of highly sensitive persons.

The integration of environmental sensitivity with the constructs of calling, meaning, and volition provides a comprehensive framework for improving career counselling practice, enabling practitioners to better support highly sensitive individuals (HSPs) in their career development. Based on a nuanced understanding of HSPs' unique processing of sensory information (Acevedo et al., 2014; Pluess, 2015; Pluess et al., 2023) and its implications for career aspirations and satisfaction (Dik & Duffy, 2015; Duffy et al., 2016b), this approach facilitates a tailored counselling and coaching methodology. It provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how personal characteristics and work attributes interact to influence career development and well-being and highlights the importance of considering both individual differences and the qualitative aspects of work in creating inclusive and supportive work environments. Such a methodology acknowledges the intricate relationship between an individual's sensitivity and their vocational and working experiences, thereby promoting more fulfilling career paths for HSPs (Ellis et al., 2011; Greven et al., 2019). It calls for a re-evaluation of traditional approaches to career counselling and coaching, and advocates for strategies that address the unique sensitivities and strengths of these individuals.

As vocational and organisational psychology continues to evolve, the integration of findings from environmental sensitivity research holds the promise of promoting more fulfilling and meaningful work experiences for all, especially those who navigate the world of work with heightened sensitivity.

3. The Role of Calling in Career Development for HSPs

The concept of work as a calling has become increasingly popular in the fields of vocational psychology and organisational behaviour, growing exponentially from less than 10 academic articles to over 500 in the last 15 years. Despite its relatively recent emergence in academic discourse, the idea of work as a vocation has deep cultural roots dating back to the sixteenth century, notably with Martin Luther, who introduced the revolutionary idea that all forms of honest work could have spiritual significance, not just monastic endeavours (Dik et al., 2023). The concept has gained significant traction in recent years, as evidenced by the proliferation of popular literature, online resources and counselling services related to calling, indicating a growing fascination with the idea (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019). This growth also coincides with what some consider a generational trend toward emphasizing meaningful work and living one's calling (Ng et al. 2010, Twenge 2014, Twenge et al. 2010). This trend highlights the increasing interest in, and relevance of, the notion of work as a vocation in contemporary society.

3.1 Defining career calling

Duffy et al (2018) describe career calling as a complex construct that encompasses elements of meaning, prosocial motivation, and a sense of being drawn to a particular vocation, whether through internal desires or external influences. Meaning in this context is about finding personal meaning and purpose in one's work, while prosocial motivation is the drive to help others or contribute to the greater good. The concept of internal/external calling encompasses the feeling of being driven towards a particular type of work. This notion of calling is seen as a crucial orientation towards one's career (Zhang et al., 2015) and is considered to be influential in the early stages of career development (Hirschi & Herrmann, 2013). The period of university and vocational training typically coincides with emerging adulthood, a developmental stage characterised by the key tasks of identity formation (Arnett, 2004; Wider et al., 2023), including critical career choices. Emerging adulthood, which spans from 18 to around 29 years of age (Arnett et al., 2014), is a period in which considerable effort is devoted to education and exploring different career paths before committing to a career path around the age of 30, as outlined in Mehta's (2020) contemporary theory of established adulthood.

The research on calling underscores the profound impact of calling on individuals' careers and well-being, while also highlighting the importance of empowering individuals to live out their callings for optimal outcomes.

Individuals who experience a calling in their careers often report numerous benefits, ranging from positive work attitudes, such as increased career decision-making self-efficacy, commitment, and job satisfaction, to improved performance. This trend is observed globally, with research spanning over 20 countries confirming these benefits (e.g., Goldfarb, 2018; Hagmaier & Abele, 2012; Praskova et al., 2014; Rothmann & Hamukang'andu, 2013; Shim & Yoo, 2012; Zhang et al., 2015). Specifically, among students, there is a strong correlation between a sense of calling and academic satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2011), as well as with career self-efficacy and career decision-making self-efficacy (Domene, 2012; Hirschi & Herrmann, 2013; Dik et al., 2008). In addition, individuals with a calling often experience greater comfort in making career choices, value their occupations more, and demonstrate higher levels of intrinsic motivation, meaning in work, and adaptability in their careers (e.g., Dik et al., 2012; Douglass & Duffy, 2015). These findings illustrate that students with a calling tend to approach career decisions with confidence and a willingness to take on future challenges, although it's important to note that these cross-sectional studies do not establish causality.

In the professional world, perceiving a calling is strongly correlated with job satisfaction, organisational attachment, and a lower likelihood of burnout and turnover intentions (e.g., Duffy et al, 2011; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Yoon et al., 2017; Cardador et al., 2011). While less research has focused on job performance, preliminary evidence suggests positive associations with sales commissions, task performance, career success, employability, and job competence (Park et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Lysova et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2014). Workers



with a calling tend to be more engaged, work longer hours, and exhibit greater organisational citizenship behaviours (Xie et al., 2016), suggesting significant organisational benefits.

Furthermore, a calling is associated with overall psychological well-being, including life meaning, enthusiasm, health satisfaction, emotional well-being, and psychological adjustment (e.g., Dik et al., 2012; Peterson et al., 2009; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Rawat & Nadavulakere, 2015; Steger et al., 2010). This suggests that the fulfilment derived from pursuing a calling at work extends to broader life satisfaction.

Research has also explored the mechanisms through which calling influences these positive outcomes, identifying various moderating and mediating factors such as core self-evaluations, motivation, nationality, goals, and source of calling (e.g., Dik et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2018; Thompson & Bunderson, 2019). Among these, work meaningfulness and career commitment emerge as significant mediators, explaining the link between calling and increased engagement and job satisfaction in various studies (e.g., Duffy et al., 2011; Hirschi, 2012).

Interestingly, the notion of living a calling plays a crucial mediating role, with evidence suggesting that realising a calling at work predicts positive outcomes more strongly than merely perceiving a calling (e.g., Duffy et al., 2013). Longitudinal studies further clarify the dynamic interplay between calling and its positive effects, highlighting both direct and reciprocal influences over time (e.g., Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Hirschi & Herrmann, 2012; Praskova et al., 2014).

For Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs), the notion of calling takes on additional meaning. HSPs have a heightened level of sensory processing sensitivity that causes them to experience and respond to their environment more deeply than their less sensitive counterparts (Aron & Aron, 1997). This intrinsic characteristic of HSPs makes the alignment of personal values with their work not only preferable, but essential to their overall well-being and job satisfaction. A career that resonates with an HSP's core values, purpose, and desire to make a difference can be particularly fulfilling, as it aligns with their deep processing of sensory input and emotional stimuli.

Integrating one's personal values with one's professional life is crucial for HSPs. It allows them to find greater meaning in their work and to approach their roles with a sense of purpose and commitment. This alignment can mitigate the potential for workplace overstimulation and stress, common challenges for HSPs, by providing them with a role that feels inherently rewarding and congruent with their identity (Aron, 1996; Schmitt, 2022; Golonka & Gulla, 2021).

For HSPs, the pursuit of a calling in their professional development is a way of using their unique sensitivities in a way that promotes personal and professional growth. By finding and engaging in work that is deeply aligned with their values and aspirations, HSPs can achieve a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction that goes beyond conventional measures of career success.



3.2 The flip side of career calling

Nevertheless, the exploration of calling in the context of environmental sensitivity reveals a nuanced landscape in which the inherent benefits of pursuing a calling can be accompanied by significant challenges, particularly for highly sensitive persons (HSPs). The research suggests that while vocation can offer profound fulfilment and alignment between personal values and professional life, it is also a double-edged sword that presents unique difficulties for HSPs.

HSPs, characterised by their deep processing of sensory information and heightened emotional reactivity (Aron & Aron, 1997), may experience the darker facets of calling more acutely. For example, Bunderson & Thompson (2009) highlighted that zookeepers with a strong sense of calling felt compelled by a moral duty, leading them to accept job-related sacrifices and become hypercritical of their organisations' actions. This heightened sense of responsibility and critical perspective may be particularly challenging for HSPs, who already process their work environment more intensely and may feel these pressures more deeply.

Similarly, Schabram & Maitlis (2017) described how animal care workers, driven by their calling, navigate negative emotions stemming from challenges to their calling, with some paths leading away from their organisations. This emotional turmoil may be magnified for HSPs, who may find the dissonance between their calling and organisational realities more distressing, potentially exacerbating the emotional toll and leading to higher rates of turnover or dissatisfaction.

Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas' (2012) findings that music students with a strong sense of calling may ignore negative career feedback may also have implications for HSPs. Their deep processing may make them more susceptible to confirmation bias, selectively interpreting information that aligns with their calling while ignoring critical feedback necessary for career growth.

Furthermore, Jo et al.'s (2018) study linking calling to increased burnout and PTSD among firefighters raises concerns about the vulnerability of HSPs in high-stress professions. The intense emotional involvement of HSPs in their work could exacerbate the effects of burnout and stress, especially if their calling requires constant exposure to traumatic situations.

Finally, studies by Berg et al. (2010) and Duffy et al. (2016c) suggest that the inability to realise a perceived calling can lead to regret and reduced life satisfaction. This effect may be particularly poignant for HSPs, whose environmental sensitivity may increase the emotional impact of unfulfilled callings, leading to greater distress and dissatisfaction.

In light of environmental sensitivity, it becomes clear that while calling can provide meaningful direction and fulfilment, it also requires careful navigation to mitigate potential negative outcomes. For HSPs, understanding the potential challenges associated with a calling - such as increased stress, emotional turmoil and the potential for dissatisfaction - is crucial. This awareness can guide individuals, career counsellors and coaches, and HR professionals in developing strategies that harness the positive aspects of a calling while safeguarding against its potential pitfalls, ultimately fostering a more sustainable and fulfilling career path for HSPs.

3.3 Measures of career calling

Calling to work can be measured using different instruments and approaches. One approach is to use multidimensional measures that capture different aspects of vocation. For example, the Calling and Vocation Questionnaire (CVQ) and the Brief Calling Scale (BCS) are two instruments that assess the presence of and search for vocation (Gargi et al., 2022). These instruments have been shown to have good reliability and validity and provide a more fine-grained, multidimensional analysis of calling (Ryan et al., 2015).

The Unified Multidimensional Calling Scale (UMCS) draws on previously published items and combines two models into a comprehensive framework that measures calling across seven facets: Passion, Purposefulness, Sacrifice, Pervasiveness, Prosocial Orientation, Transcendent Calling, and Identity (Vianello et al., 2018).

Another approach is to develop a scale that captures the consuming, meaningful passion that people experience for a particular domain. The 12-item scale developed in a study by Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2011) has been shown to have reliability and validity across contexts and over time (Bryan et al., 2012). This scale can be used to assess satisfaction with vocation, career-related self-efficacy, professional identity and other related factors (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011). Overall, these measures provide psychometrically sound ways of measuring work calling and can contribute to research on calling, meaning of work and careers.

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of these instruments, including their main features, measured outcomes and relevance to HSP.

Table 1 - Measures of calling. Our elaboration.

Name of the Instrument	Main Characteristic of the Instrument	Outcomes Measured	Relevance for HSP
Calling and Vocation Questionnaire (CVQ)	Assesses the presence of and search for vocation	Vocation, calling, career satisfaction	Potentially high due to the focus on personal meaning and purpose
Brief Calling Scale (BCS)	Brief measure for assessing calling	Calling, career satisfaction, professional identity	Potentially high due to the focus on personal calling and satisfaction



Name of the Instrument	Main Characteristic of the Instrument	Outcomes Measured	Relevance for HSP
Unified Multidimensional Calling Scale (UMCS)	Measures calling across seven facets	Passion, Purposefulness, Sacrifice, Pervasiveness, Prosocial Orientation, Transcendent Calling, Identity	High, as it covers aspects like passion, transcendent summons, purposefulness and identity that are relevant to HSPs
12-item scale	Captures the consuming, meaningful passion for a domain	Satisfaction with vocation, career-related self-efficacy, professional identity	High, due to its focus on passion and meaningful engagement

It's important to note that the table has been constructed based on the general information available and the typical use of such instruments in occupational, organisational and behavioural research. Relevance to HSPs is inferred from the nature of the instruments and their focus on operational variables such as passion, purpose and personal meaning, which are likely to be important to HSPs.

4. Work meaning and environmental sensitivity

Contemporary research in the social sciences starts from the belief that work is a fundamental component of a fulfilling life.

Recently there has been a significant growth in interest and research on meaningful work, catalysed by the development of measurement tools and increased public awareness. This burgeoning field has seen a notable increase in scholarly activity, with citations on meaningful work rising dramatically. The expansion of research in this area is supported by comprehensive reviews, handbooks and practitioner-oriented books that explore the multifaceted nature of meaningful work and its implications (You et al., 2021; Bailey et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2018; Steger, 2017, 2019; Madden et al., 2019; Dik et al., 2013).

4.1 Defining meaningful work

Although there is consensus on this notion, definitions of meaningful work vary widely, many arising from empirical attempts to quantify the concept rather than from theoretical foundations. One of the more compelling theoretical definitions posits that for work to be considered meaningful, it must not only generate a personal sense of significance for the employee, but also be recognised for its ethical or moral value beyond the individual (Yeoman et al., 2019). From this perspective, examining meaningful work requires assessing whether careers provide psychologically appealing (e.g., autonomy, respect) and structurally favourable (e.g., freedom, security) conditions, in addition to considering the ethical or moral contributions of the work.

More recent discussions of meaningful work have broadened the concept to include the pursuit of personally meaningful career and occupational endeavours beyond mere work tasks. This perspective emphasises the importance of aligning work with individual values, strengths, motivations and interests. However, contemporary discussions also recognise the role of context, including social justice and access to decent work, in shaping meaningful work. Despite the growing recognition of these contextual factors, research still largely prioritises individuals' subjective assessments of the meaningfulness of their work (Lysova et al., 2019).

The evolution of meaningful work research from its psychiatric origins to its current prominence in business and management studies reflects a significant expansion. Initially influenced by Hackman and Oldham's (1976) model of job characteristics, which viewed meaningful work through the lens of job task characteristics, the field has since moved towards a more holistic understanding. Wrzesniewski et al (1997) linked meaningful work to the broader concept of vocation, emphasising the role of work in one's life rather than just its task-related aspects.

Contemporary scholarship on meaningful work, while diverse, shares common themes that emphasise the integration of the whole self into work, the balance between different aspects of self and work, and the pursuit of work as an autonomous expression of one's purpose. Researchers such as Chalofsky (2003), Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) and Rosso et al., (2010) have developed these ideas further, exploring how meaningful work involves expressing oneself, developing and realising one's potential, connecting with others and contributing to the greater good.

Understanding meaningful work means recognising its unique characteristics and how it differs from the concept of vocation. While both concepts are integral to personal fulfilment and vocational psychology, they address different aspects of an individual's engagement with their work.

The primary difference between meaningful work and vocation lies in their origin and focus. Meaningful work is more concerned with the content and impact of the work itself, emphasising the meaning and fulfilment derived from the nature of the work and its outcomes. In contrast,



vocation is more about an individual's inner drive and personal conviction towards a particular type of work or career path, often linked to a deeper sense of purpose or duty that goes beyond mere job satisfaction or career success.

Furthermore, meaningful work can be cultivated or found in a variety of occupations and industries, suggesting that individuals can derive meaning from any work that is consistent with their values and makes a positive contribution to the world. A vocation, however, is usually experienced as a specific and often unchanging direction in one's professional life that compels an individual to pursue a particular career or professional endeavour.

In summary, while there is no single theory that encapsulates meaningful work, the prevailing discourse identifies three main attributes: the functional value of work tasks, the psychological experience of meaningfulness, and the ethical implications of one's work. Together, these elements emphasise that meaningful work not only fulfils individual aspirations but also makes a positive contribution to society. And while both meaningful work and vocation contribute significantly to vocational satisfaction and personal fulfilment, they do so through different mechanisms and origins - one through the nature and impact of the work itself, and the other through a personal, sometimes spiritual, drive to fulfil a particular role or purpose.

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated the positive impact of meaningful work on individual and organisational outcomes. Employees who perceive their work to be meaningful report higher job satisfaction, engagement, creativity and commitment, as well as lower absenteeism and turnover intentions (Kamdron, 2005; Sparks & Schenk, 2001; Harpaz & Fu, 2002; Johnson & Jiang, 2017; Steger et al., 2013; Cohen-Meitar et al., 2009; Montani et al., 2017; Johns et al., 1992; Steger et al., 2012; Soane et al, 2013; Fairlie, 2011). These findings underscore the need for further research to clarify causality and potential reciprocal influences or external factors contributing to these relationships.

Furthermore, meaningful work enhances organisational climate through behaviours that go beyond job requirements and deepen employees' commitment to their roles and the larger mission of their organisations. Leadership practices that promote meaningful work, such as transformational and spiritual leadership, are critical to cultivating these positive environments (You et al., 20-21; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Duchon & Plowman, 2005; McCrae, Boreham, & Ferguson, 2011).

The link between meaningful work and overall well-being is also well documented, with studies highlighting links to life satisfaction, well-being, positive emotions, resilience, and a healthier work-life balance (Steger et al., 2010; Douglass et al., 2016; Arnold et al., 2007; Steger et al., 2013; Van Windgerden & Poell, 2019; Daniel, 2015; McCrae et al., 2011; Tummers & Knies, 2013). This research, often using the WAMI for measurement, reinforces the notion that meaningful work contributes significantly to personal fulfilment and organisational success.

Theoretical evidence suggests that the positive effects of meaningful work stem from its alignment with one's identity, the pursuit of life goals, and intrinsic motivation, although empirical evidence exploring these mechanisms is limited. In particular, longitudinal research suggests that initiatives aimed at enhancing the meaningfulness of work, such as the use of



strengths and job crafting, can lead to increased perceptions of meaningful work (You et al., 2021; Tims et al., 2016).

4.2 The significance of meaningful work for HSPs

Understanding the nature of meaningful work and how it differs from vocation is central to appreciating its role in the lives of Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs). Meaningful work, as conceptualised in contemporary social science, is work that not only generates a subjective sense of meaningfulness for the individual but is also considered to have significance beyond the individual, encompassing moral or ethical benefits (Yeoman et al., 2019). This dual criterion - personal fulfilment coupled with broader societal contribution - resonates deeply with HSPs, whose increased depth of processing may lead to a greater need for meaning and ethical engagement in their work (Malinakova et al., 2021; Gulla & Golonka, 2021).

The critical role of meaningful work in promoting eudaimonic well-being for HSPs

For HSPs, meaningful work is not just a job, but an essential component of their eudaimonic well-being. The intrinsic characteristics of HSPs, such as deep processing, heightened reflectiveness, and a keen awareness of subtleties, reinforce their desire for work that is not only personally satisfying but also makes a positive contribution to the world around them. This alignment between one's work and one's values and ethical standards is crucial for HSPs, providing a sense of purpose that transcends mere professional satisfaction and taps into deeper realms of personal fulfilment and societal contribution.

The interplay between environmental sensitivity and the pursuit of meaningful work.

The pursuit of meaningful work among HSPs is further nuanced by their environmental sensitivity. Research suggests that HSPs have a unique ability to respond more intensely not only to negative aspects of the work environment, but also to positive experiences and resources, enabling them to derive greater fulfilment from their work under optimal conditions (Elst et al., 2019). However, this heightened sensitivity also means that HSPs may feel more overwhelmed by challenging job demands, highlighting the importance of a supportive and resource-rich work environment in promoting their engagement and well-being.

The job demands-resources model, extended to include sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) as a critical factor in employee functioning, highlights the dual role of SPS as both a personal resource and a potential vulnerability (Bakker et al., 2014; Elst et al., 2019). This duality highlights the complex interplay between an HSP's environmental sensitivity and their search for meaningful work, suggesting that while HSPs may thrive and find deep satisfaction in roles that align with their values, they may also be more vulnerable to the pressures and demands of the workplace.



In essence, the journey towards meaningful work for HSPs is characterised by a search for balance - between personal fulfilment and ethical contribution, between embracing their sensitivity as a strength and managing the challenges it may present in the workplace. By understanding and addressing the unique needs and predispositions of HSPs, both individuals and organisations can better support them in finding and thriving in work that is truly meaningful.

4.3 Measures of work meaning

Measures of meaningful work fall into two categories: unidimensional and multidimensional. The earliest and most recognised unidimensional measure was developed in conjunction with the Job Characteristics Model by Hackman and Oldham, who introduced a way of assessing how employees view their work in terms of meaning, value and worth through the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS; Hackman & Oldham, 1975). This four-item scale asks about the personal and perceived views of co-workers about the meaning of work tasks. This basic measure inspired further developments, including Spreitzer's (1995) Meaning subscale and May, Gilson, and Harter's (2004) Meaningful Work Scale, which shows strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$) in assessing the importance and meaning of work. However, the psychometric properties of these measures have not been extensively evaluated, and their use in research on job characteristics models has been limited or replaced by proxies for meaningful work. Additional unidimensional measures by Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee (2007) and Treadgold (1999) show acceptable reliability but lack extensive psychometric validation, leaving questions about their dimensional structure and cross-cultural applicability.

On the other hand, multidimensional measures tend to be based on more thorough methodologies and detailed reporting of psychometric properties. For example, Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) introduced the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS) based on previous qualitative studies, which includes seven dimensions of meaningful work identified through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Despite its innovative approach, the model fit indices of the CMWS suggest a need for further refinement. The Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger et al., 2012), a 10-item instrument assessing three dimensions of meaningful work, stands out for its psychometric robustness. Established through literature review and factor analysis, the WAMI has been validated in multiple languages and countries, making it the most widely used multidimensional measure of meaningful work (Bailey et al., 2019). Among the multidimensional measures, the WAMI is the only one which demonstrated psychometric strength, providing a reliable and comprehensive tool for studying meaningful work in a variety of settings.

Table 2 summarises the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI), the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS), Spreitzer's Meaning subscale and May, Gilson and Harter's Meaningful Work Scale alongside the WAMI. The table outlines the main characteristics of each instrument, the outcomes it measures and its relevance to Highly Sensitive People (HSP).



Table 2 - Measures of meaningful work. Our elaboration.

Name of the Instrument	Main Characteristic of the Instrument	Outcomes Measured	Relevance for HSP
Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI)	Assesses three core components of meaningful work: significance and purpose, contribution to broader meaning in life, and positive contribution to the greater good.	Positive Meaning Meaning-Making through Work Greater Good Motivations Overall Meaningful Work Score	High relevance due to HSPs' need for meaningful, fulfilling work that aligns with their values and contributes to their well-being.
Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS)	Developed alongside the Job Characteristics Model to assess how employees view their work in terms of meaning, value, and worth.	Employee motivation Job performance Job satisfaction	Potentially relevant as it measures aspects of job design that can affect the meaningfulness and satisfaction HSPs derive from their work.
Spreitzer's Meaning Subscale	Part of a broader measure of psychological empowerment, focusing on the meaningfulness of work.	Meaningfulness of work as part of psychological empowerment	High relevance as it directly measures the meaningfulness of work, which is a critical aspect for HSPs in finding work fulfilling.
Meaningful Work Scale (May, Gilson, and Harter)	Measures the importance and meaning of work, showing strong internal consistency.	Importance and meaning of work	High relevance as it assesses how meaningful and important work is to an individual, aligning with HSPs' desire for purposeful work.

Each of these instruments offers a unique perspective on the meaningfulness and significance of work, which is particularly relevant for HSPs who often seek deeper meaning and purpose in their careers. The Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS) provides a more comprehensive assessment of job characteristics that may influence satisfaction and motivation, which may influence HSPs' perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work. Spreitzer's Meaning Subscale



and the Meaningful Work Scale directly measure aspects of work that are likely to resonate with HSPs' values and needs for meaningful engagement in their careers.

The WAMI is particularly relevant to HSPs because it measures aspects of work that are critical to their job satisfaction and overall well-being. HSPs are more likely to thrive in roles where they feel their work is meaningful and contributes to a greater good, in line with the core components assessed by the WAMI. This makes the WAMI a valuable tool for research and practice involving HSPs, helping to identify work environments and roles that support their unique needs and potential for contribution.

5. Work volition

While some may feel an intrinsic pull towards meaningful work, many individuals encounter barriers that limit their ability to freely choose this path (Blustein, 2006). Work volition refers to the will to make work-related decisions despite external constraints [16]. In real career activities, students have to make compromises and experience frustrations caused by, among other things, value confusion, indecision and external constraints [17]. Work volition is the will to develop and achieve career goals by overcoming these difficulties, together with the belief that future career opportunities will be available (Kwon, 2019). Because of these characteristics, work volition has emerged as a factor that positively influences academic satisfaction [18,19], job satisfaction [20] and life satisfaction [21].

5.1 Defining work volition

Work volition, defined as perceived autonomy in career choice despite barriers (Duffy et al., 2012), has become a focus of vocational psychology. This emphasis reflects a growing recognition of the influence of privilege on career decisions and challenges the historically individual-centred perspective of dominant career development theories (Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016b).

Work volition emerges from considerations of power and privilege (Blustein, 2006; Duffy, Bott, Allan, et al., 2012), highlighting how systemic oppression affects those with marginalized identities (e.g., women, people of color, LGBTQ+ populations). These groups face structural and economic barriers, inspiring the theoretical underpinnings of work volition. However, work volition goes beyond mere barriers and instead focuses on perceptions of career choice in the midst of these obstacles, which are shaped by both external factors and individual characteristics (e.g., personality traits, career self-efficacy; Duffy et al., 2012).

The integration of work volition into career development models, particularly within the Psychology of Working Framework (PWF; Blustein, 2006; Blustein, 2013), highlights its importance. The PWF, and subsequently the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT; Duffy et



al., 2016b), critiques the privileged bias of traditional vocational theories by proposing work volition as a crucial mediator between contextual barriers and the attainment of decent work. This theory posits that one's perception of one's ability to choose one's career path is an important mechanism through which economic constraints and experiences of marginalisation influence career outcomes (Duffy et al., 2016b).

Research on work volition and its links to contextual factors and career outcomes is still in its infancy and points to a complex, multidimensional interplay of variables. The experiences of individuals from marginalised backgrounds, for example, illustrate how structural, environmental, interpersonal and intrapersonal barriers intertwine with personal strengths and supportive contexts to shape career choices and perceptions of work volition. This complexity requires a comprehensive examination of predictive pathways at different levels - individual, interpersonal and institutional - to fully understand how work volition and contextual variables interact.

5.2 The relationship between work volition, environmental sensitivity, and career satisfaction for HSPs.

The relationship between work volition, environmental sensitivity and career satisfaction among highly sensitive individuals (HSPs) is multifaceted, reflecting the nuanced ways in which innate sensitivity interacts with personal choice and career fulfilment. Identified by a pronounced control pause system, HSPs often exhibit heightened caution and deliberation prior to action, which can lead to procrastination in certain contexts (Aron, 2017). While this trait is beneficial in promoting thorough analysis and deep reflection, it may also influence their career trajectories and satisfaction by requiring environments where reflective planning is valued over immediate action.

HSPs' environmental sensitivity equips them with unique traits such as empathy, creativity and a keen sense of justice, and enhances their ability to perceive beauty and intuition (Aron, 2017). However, societal misconceptions may label these individuals as shy or withdrawn, affecting their self-esteem and potentially hindering their career advancement. In particular, the oversaturation of social stimuli poses a significant challenge, driving HSPs towards environments that are less likely to cause stress or overwhelm.

The role of the family environment is crucial in shaping HSPs' perceptions of their sensitivities. A supportive background can empower HSPs to view their sensitivity as a strength, enabling them to create appropriate work environments that meet their unique needs (Aron, 2017). Conversely, a less supportive upbringing can lead HSPs to view their sensitivity as an obstacle and struggle to find or create supportive work conditions, resulting in ongoing dissatisfaction.

Despite these challenges, high sensitivity should not be interpreted as a lack of resilience. On the contrary, HSPs have the ability to overcome difficulties by using their particular



strengths - such as precise information processing and nuanced observation - facilitated by a reflective mindset. This ability not only aids in coping with adversity, but also in strategic planning and emotional regulation, potentially leading to successful adaptation even in challenging circumstances (Belsky & Pluess, 2009; Pluess & Belsky, 2013).

The propensity of HSPs to engage in entrepreneurship, as discussed by Harms et al. (2019), represents a pathway through which they can creatively and productively use their environmental sensitivity. By engaging in entrepreneurial ventures, HSPs have the opportunity to tailor their work environments to their sensitivities, thereby increasing their independence, career satisfaction, and success. This entrepreneurial drive underscores the ability of HSPs to transform perceived sensitivities into strategic advantages and highlights the complex causality between high sensitivity, opportunity recognition and the formation of entrepreneurial intentions.

The relationship between work volition, environmental sensitivity and career satisfaction for HSPs underscores the critical importance of recognising and harnessing the unique predispositions of HSPs within the workforce. By fostering an understanding of these relationships, it becomes possible to create more inclusive and supportive work environments that not only accommodate the needs of HSPs, but also celebrate their contributions, ultimately leading to greater career satisfaction and success.

5.3 Measures of work volition

Instruments for measuring work volition target different demographic groups, including working adults and students, to address the unique developmental challenges each group faces. The Work Volition Scale (WVS) for adults (Duffy, Diemer, Perry, et al., 2012) includes items that focus on the present, while the Work Volition Scale for college students (Duffy, Diemer, & Jadidian, 2012) includes items that focus on the future, assessing both levels of volition and perceived constraints.

The adult WVS is divided into three subscales: volition, which assesses the perceived ability to make career choices; financial constraints, which assesses the perceived impact of financial barriers on career choices; and structural constraints, which examines the influence of structural barriers on career choices. The student version has two subscales: one for volition, with items such as 'Once I enter the working world, I can easily find a new job if I want to', and another for constraints, with items such as 'I feel that my family situation limits the types of jobs I could do'. Validation studies for both versions of the scale have shown them to be reliable, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .70 to .89 for the subscales and .86 to .92 for the total scores. They have also demonstrated validity through evidence of construct and incremental validity. For example, the Adult WVS showed the expected correlations with constructs such as work locus of control, core self-evaluations, adaptive personality traits, career barriers and career compromise. It also accounted for additional variance in job satisfaction beyond that explained

by established predictors such as core self-evaluations and personality traits (Duffy, Diemer, Perry, et al., 2012). Similarly, the student version correlated as expected with career decision self-efficacy, core self-evaluations, career locus of control, career barriers, and the Big Five personality traits (Duffy, Diemer, & Jadidian, 2012).

The Table 3 includes the Work Volition Scale for both working adults and college students, as well as the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI), with their main characteristics, outcomes measured, and relevance for highly sensitive persons (HSP).

Table 3 - Measures of meaningful work. Our elaboration.

Name of the Instrument	Main Characteristics of the Instrument	Outcomes Measured	Relevance for HSP
Work Volition Scale (Adult version)	Measures perceived capacity to make career choices, financial constraints, and structural constraints.	Volition Financial Constraints Structural Constraints	Relevant as HSPs may be particularly sensitive to constraints that limit their career choices, affecting their work satisfaction and well-being.
Work Volition Scale (Student version)	Measures perceived capacity to make future career choices and constraints to volition for students.	Volition Constraints to Volition	Relevant as HSPs may benefit from understanding potential future constraints, aiding in career planning and reducing anxiety about work transitions.

The Work Volition Scale, available for both adults and students, is particularly useful for Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) as it helps to identify barriers that may limit their career choices and impact on their job satisfaction and well-being. By using these scales, HSPs can become more aware of their work environment, refine their career planning efforts, and reduce anxiety associated with their career paths.

6. Practice Implications for Career Counselors, HR Professionals, and Coaches

It is important for career counsellors, HR professionals and coaches to recognise the unique interplay between work volition, environmental sensitivity and career satisfaction, especially when supporting Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) in their career development.



Integrating evidence-based recommendations and strategies can significantly improve the career trajectories of HSPs by fostering environments that nurture their vocation, purpose and volition.

6.1 Evidence-based recommendations for supporting HSPs

Understanding the Existential Component. Career development is deeply intertwined with existential concerns, particularly for HSPs who value eudaimonic well-being and societal contribution through their work (Dik & Duffy, 2015). For clients with a spiritual or religious worldview, the integration of faith and work can promote coherence, while for those inclined towards existential questions, linking career to life meaning is beneficial (Cahalan & Schuurman, 2016; Hardy, 1990).

Promoting eudaimonic well-being: Meaningfulness at work acts as a buffer against mental health challenges and improves psychological functioning (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Career interventions should prioritise eudaimonic well-being by encouraging clients to pursue work that aligns with their values and contributes to the greater good.

Promoting prosocial values: Career counselling should actively encourage exploration of how one's work can have a positive impact on society. Ethically, counsellors are moving away from value neutrality towards beneficence, focusing on outcomes that benefit others and contribute to societal well-being (Patterson, 1989; Tjeltveit, 2006; Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005).

Integrating coaching and training for individuals with high sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) requires acknowledging their unique experiences and fostering environments that support their well-being and career satisfaction. Individuals with high SPS benefit from recognising the normalcy of their responses to stimuli and learning to accommodate their sensitivity in different areas of life (Evers et al., 2008).

Practices such as muscle relaxation, meditation, mindfulness, yoga, aikido or exercise can provide significant relief and coping mechanisms (Evers et al., 2008; Amemiya et al., 2020; Gulla & Golonka, 2021). In particular, mindfulness training has been highlighted as an important strategy for managing overstimulation and associated emotional reactivity (Gulla & Golonka, 2021). The efficacy of mindfulness and yoga in improving attentional control and mood in highly sensitive individuals has been demonstrated (Amemiya et al., 2020), highlighting the potential of yoga and other somatic practices to enhance emotional and attentional regulation and thereby alleviate feelings of overstimulation.

Given that high SPS is associated with mental health risks such as anxiety and depression (Liss et al., 2005), the development of cognitive skills, including communication, decision-making and emotional coping, is essential (Yano et al., 2021). The promotion of attention and emotional control through mindfulness and yoga is consistent with interventions that amplify



positive outcomes for HSPs, as suggested by De Villers et al. (2018). This approach can break the cycle of heightened negative emotions and cognitive processing, reducing anxiety, depression and somatic complaints. Targeting cognitive reactivity in psychological interventions may be a more effective strategy than focusing on directly modifying SPS (Wyller et al., 2017).

Interventions should aim to increase coherence, self-efficacy, engagement and affective states in HSPs (Evers et al., 2008; Amemiya et al., 2020). In this way, HSPs may find their work more understandable, manageable and meaningful, enabling them to engage more fully and productively. Such interventions not only benefit HSPs by improving their quality of life and work effectiveness, but also enrich the broader community by tapping into the deep reflective capacities of highly sensitive individuals (Aron & Aron, 1997; Gulla & Golonka, 2021).

Incorporating these practices into career development strategies can create sensitive-friendly work environments that support HSPs in realising their vocation, finding meaning in their work, and exercising agency in their careers. This holistic approach recognises the unique contributions of HSPs and fosters an inclusive and supportive workplace culture.

6.2 Strategies for creating a Sensitive Friendly Work Environment

Inclusive career choice and accommodation: Incorporating measures of vocation and meaningful work into career counselling can help clients reflect on their career paths and work experiences and increase their sense of fulfilment and contribution (Berg et al., 2013; Dik & Duffy, 2015).

Job Crafting for Meaning: Encouraging HSPs to engage in job crafting can increase the meaningfulness of their current roles. By changing tasks, relationships, or perceptions of work, their jobs can become more aligned with their intrinsic values and relational preferences (Berg et al., 2013).

Navigating work volition: Assessing work volition is essential to understanding the constraints HSPs face and working to increase their perceived freedom in career choices. Tools such as the Work Volition Scale can provide insight into the barriers HSPs face and help develop strategies for effective self-advocacy (Duffy et al., 2012).

Building resilience and critical awareness: Supporting HSPs to develop resilience and critical consciousness can empower them to overcome systemic barriers. This includes raising awareness of socio-political forces and fostering adaptability in the face of challenges (Diemer, 2009; Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer et al., 2016).

By fostering environments that value vocation, purpose and volition, practitioners can help HSPs successfully navigate their career paths and ensure that their unique needs are met, and their potential is fully realised.

7. Queen's Legacy in the Organisation: Embracing Sensitivity in the Next Wave of Organizational Change

In the world of music, Queen is the clearest example of a band characterised by total self-management, collaboration, and common purpose.

As a seminal band in the annals of music history, Queen's journey exemplifies the essence of self-management, collaboration, and a shared vision, deviating from the conventional rock band archetype dominated by a singular leading figure. Despite the popular narrative that positions Freddie Mercury as the band's unequivocal frontman, the reality of Queen's dynamic was far more democratic and inclusive. This legendary band was a confluence of four distinct personalities and composers - Freddie Mercury, Brian May, Roger Taylor and John Deacon - each bringing their unique creative visions and influences on the table.

Their ability to fuse vastly different styles and influences into a single, recognisable sound speaks volumes about their collaborative spirit. Queen was not just a band; it was a musical project that transcended individual egos, where each member had an equal stake in the creative output. This approach allowed them to explore a range of genres, from rock and opera to disco and folk, without losing their distinctive identity. The band's ethos of equal contribution is perhaps best symbolised by their decision in the later part of their career to credit all songs to Queen as a whole, rather than to individual members. This move reinforced their commitment to unity and collective creativity.

The album cover of "The Miracle" visually encapsulates this philosophy, depicting the faces of the band members fused into a single, mythological four-headed entity. This image not only emphasises their close partnership, but also serves as a metaphor for their musical synergy - despite their individual differences, they were able to fuse their talents into a cohesive and powerful whole.

Queen's story is a testament to the power of collaboration and shared purpose in creative endeavour. Their legacy is a reminder that when individuals come together, respect each other's contributions and work towards a common goal, they can transcend traditional boundaries and achieve something truly extraordinary. This model of equal partnership and mutual respect holds valuable lessons for various fields beyond music, emphasising that collaboration and diversity of thought are critical ingredients for innovation and success.

A compelling parallel emerges between the narrative of Queen and the principles of the Teal organization.

At each pivotal stage of human evolution and societal transformation, new collaborative capabilities have emerged, fostering the development of innovative organisational models. The structure of organisations as we currently understand them reflects the prevailing worldview



and evolutionary stage of the majority of humanity. We are on the cusp of a transition to a higher level of consciousness, a shift that is unfolding gradually, shaped by visionaries who intuitively grasp the essence of this emerging stage and are gradually establishing new organisational paradigms for coexistence and cooperation on our planet.

Frederic Laloux, in his seminal work 'Reinventing Organizations', uses the dynamic spiral theory to map the evolution of human consciousness, represented by colour-coded levels, each representing different worldviews and organisational structures. Each level has its own advantages and disadvantages, with each successive stage encapsulating and transcending its predecessors. Laloux's first chapters trace the historical progression of organisational models with the aim of delineating the characteristics of the forthcoming 'Teal' level (Laloux, 2014).

Laloux's extensive research encompassed over 100 organisations worldwide, pioneering the move beyond traditional management paradigms to more conscious and humane practices. Despite diversity in size and sector, these organisations shared three foundational pillars characteristic of the 'Teal' stage: Self-Management, Wholeness and Evolutionary Purpose.

Self-management. In contrast to hierarchical structures, self-management distributes authority, enabling a dynamic in which decisions are made without the traditional boss-subordinate dynamic. This model promotes autonomy and accountability, allowing teams to self-organise and innovate without seeking approval from higher-ups. HSPs, who may struggle with hierarchical constraints, find self-management particularly empowering, allowing them to excel and find motivation in autonomy (Laloux, 2014).

For example, at Buurtzorg, a Dutch care company, local teams decide on shifts and operating methods. Decisions are made by mutual agreement through a consensus process. Buurtzorg has been hugely successful. In less than ten years, it has become the largest home care company in the Netherlands, with more than 15,000 employees.

Wholeness: Teal organisations encourage individuals to bring their whole selves to work, transcending the traditional divide between professional and personal identities. This holistic approach fosters deeper, empathetic connections and values intuition alongside rationality, incorporating practices such as meditation into daily routines. For HSPs, this environment is liberating, allowing them to fully express their sensitivity and empathy (Laloux, 2014).

Such is the case with Patagonia. The American outdoor clothing company is committed to protecting nature and creating a positive and rewarding work environment that has a positive impact on the world.

Evolutionary purpose: Teal organisations see themselves as living entities with their own evolutionary trajectories. This perspective shifts away from market-driven agendas towards a collective listening to the emergent purpose of the organisation and aligning it with the purposes of individual members. For HSPs whose work is deeply intertwined with creativity, originality and meaning, such an environment is not only motivating but also nourishing to their spirit (Laloux, 2014).



One example is Gore (the makers of Goretex), which has more than 10,000 associates (as they call their employees) and a turnover of more than \$3 billion. It provides for diffuse decision-making processes, where maximum individual responsibility is required, but in pursuit of the organisation's evolutionary goals.

For those not yet ready to transition to the Teal organisational model, B Corp is a viable alternative that embodies values of accountability, transparency, interdependence, innovation, inclusion and regeneration. Accountability in B Corps emphasises both legal compliance and a deeper commitment to care and nurture, fostering a sense of interconnectedness between people, nature and action. These values must be manifested in tangible actions across a range of areas such as environmental sustainability, cultural development and community support. For example, monitoring water consumption and energy efficiency in company facilities or promoting social initiatives can demonstrate this commitment. Italy, which pioneered the legal recognition of such companies through Law No. 208 of 2015, demonstrates the potential of B Corps, as evidenced by the rapid growth in the number of Benefit Societies and B Corp certified companies.

This model suggests a phased approach for countries, starting with promoting B Corp recognition and practices, especially in regions that are lagging behind. Following this, countries could move forward by adopting the Teal principles to flatten power hierarchies, possibly integrating the Teal organisation into the legal framework of Benefit Corporations. Italy's leadership in B Corp certification positions it to champion further legal innovation and potentially serve as a global model.

For countries where B Corps lack formal recognition or widespread adoption, grassroots work is needed to foster growth. Grassroots promotion of these models, supported by consumer advocacy, can drive competitiveness and create a virtuous circle of mutual benefit. Effective marketing and communication, wary of superficiality, is crucial. Implementing B Corp and Teal principles can improve the quality of life by transcending traditional work stressors and aligning personal and professional aspirations.

As these paradigms gain market dominance, the focus shifts from profit to positive impact, challenging companies entrenched in bureaucratic systems to adapt. While this transformation may seem daunting, it can be approached through achievable, segmented missions, offering a pathway to a more integrated and fulfilling work-life paradigm.

In the context of the current global landscape, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for a new leadership model becomes apparent. This era has highlighted the need for mental health awareness and human-centred management practices, challenging long-held corporate norms and necessitating a shift towards more flexible, empathetic leadership styles.

We are in the era of machine learning and artificial intelligence, which are already profoundly changing our lifestyles, our needs and the way we produce goods and services. We are living in an era of economic and social crisis, in which, for the first time, several generations with remarkably different values and needs are living together in the workplace, and in which people's need to find meaning and self-fulfilment in work and life is growing.



Sociologists, futurologists and economists all agree that the scale and speed of change will be such that any reference to best practice and predictive models will be impossible, and that the difference will be made by people and their ability to understand and respond to the signs of change.

It is clear, therefore, that highly structured, rigid and complex organisational systems, with large numbers of poorly motivated people and high management costs, such as the orange ones, are no longer suited to the new reality. On the other hand, green organisational systems, which are too focused on social peace and the search for everyone's agreement, fail to express the necessary dynamism and focus on business objectives.

Teal organisations, according to Laloux (2014), are the product of the most recent evolutionary stage of human consciousness, expressed in social and organisational terms, which, according to Maslow's theory of needs, coincides with the level of self-fulfilment.

The transition to this organisational model occurs when the leader's mental model changes and ego fears are tamed. The goal is no longer success for success's sake but authenticity and the discovery of our true nature, adversity is met with gratitude, judgement is replaced by compassion, rationality by wisdom, and relationships become full, deep and generous.

This evolutionary shift requires a deep commitment from the organisation, based on core principles, values and a philosophy of life and work that must be wholeheartedly embraced and promoted by senior management to drive the change. Transformation begins with the dissemination of vision, priorities and information from the top, together with the empowerment and trust distributed throughout the organisation, providing strategic direction and support to each team.

Middle management plays a critical role in facilitating team support and problem solving, becoming an integral part of the team dynamic. Leadership in this paradigm is determined by one's actions, attitudes and skills rather than by a given title. Managers become coaches, facilitating optimal working conditions through support and active listening rather than authority.

This complex and sensitive change process does not happen overnight, but requires careful, collective effort and commitment. It requires a thorough understanding of the organisation's current state and its potential for development. Paradoxically, the question isn't how to become a Teal organisation, but how to use the evolutionary framework as inspiration for conscious, innovative steps towards development.

The journey involves acknowledging the organisation's current circumstances, aligning the motivations for change, defining the evolutionary purpose, identifying differences and their causes, and then initiating specific, actionable steps forward.

Replacing the existing model with a new one as if it were a spare part, without preparing and engaging the workforce, is not feasible. It's vital to ensure that the drive for profitability is not the sole driver of change and that the values, principles and practices espoused by leadership



are consistent with the fundamental aspects of the Teal model. Acting contrary to these principles, especially when faced with challenges, undermines the effort.

As demonstrated, this is not just a structural reorganisation, but a profound cultural change that encompasses the entire organisation and extends into its societal context, involving every member of the organisation in a significant and meaningful way.

Teal is also emerging alongside methods such as Presencing and U-Lab, and ideas from authors such as Meg Wheatley and Peter Senge. It incorporates different leadership styles and insights into emotional and spiritual intelligence, as well as managing polarities. Techniques such as systemic constellations and deep democracy reveal hidden organisational dynamics. As practitioners blend these different approaches, it becomes clear that while Teal is inspiring and influential, organisations need to choose the methodology that best suits their specific needs.

HSPs, with their organised, reliable and conscientious nature, are uniquely positioned to lead in this virtual, decentralised work environment. Their thoughtful approach to decision-making and natural inclination towards empathetic leadership can guide organisations through this transformative period, embodying the principles of self-management, wholeness and evolutionary purpose.

As we navigate this transition, the role of HSPs as change agents becomes increasingly important, offering insights into creating more inclusive, conscious and purposeful organisational cultures. In doing so, HSPs not only create a better work environment for themselves, but also model a more compassionate and holistic approach to organisational development for the wider world.

Conclusion

Future research should explore how different learning and development strategies influence meaningful work for Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs), with a particular focus on workplace learning mechanisms such as mentoring that rely on social interactions. It's vital to further refine measures of environmental sensitivity, including assessing stimuli that cause discomfort and investigating the “control pause” mechanism and physiological indicators of HSPs.

The paper also suggests practical implications for Human Resource Development (HRD) in promoting meaningfulness at work, emphasising the role of the organisation in promoting meaningful work and the importance of HRD strategies that support continuous learning, innovation, employee empowerment and attention to working conditions.

It also highlights the self-regulated job search model as central to understanding the career development of HSPs and advocates for interventions that take into account their deep processing skills and mindfulness competencies to enhance their well-being and job satisfaction.



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High Sensitivity in Vocational Education and Training: How to support Highly Sensitive Students

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Abstract

This chapter provides strategies that advisors in Vocational Education and Training can implement when counselling Highly Sensitive students. It is based on the premise that a Vocational Education and Training advisor should not impose any type of path on the student, but rather guide them towards increase self-knowledge, positive coping mechanisms and the pursuit of a career or further studies that play to their strengths, such as emotional intelligence, appreciation for beauty and art, conscientiousness, attention to detail, and avoiding careers that will overwhelm them. To do so, this chapter presents strategies that can be used to support students and guide them into setting career goals. Additionally, feedback and monitoring strategies are given, both to receive and to give feedback as a Vocational Education and Training advisor, as well as to monitor progress and/or outcomes.

Keywords: Vocational Education and Training, Highly Sensitive Trainee, Highly Sensitive Student, Career Counselling, Career Guidance

8. High Sensitivity in Vocational Education and Training

Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) have the potential to contribute in a positive manner to a company as much as any other worker and build a lasting and rewarding career. However, although over 20 per cent of the population identify as HSP, it is often overlooked as a personality trait to be considered when considering career management, when it comes to supporting students who have yet to join the workforce. Adolescence is a challenging time for young people, and they often find themselves lacking the preparation to transition smoothly through this phase of their lives into a fulfilling future occupation (Hoxter, 2002). If a young person is Highly Sensitive, this transition might be even harder, and this is where educational and vocational guidance counselling systems can intervene in a positive manner, guiding students and helping them develop the mechanisms to be able to make the best career choices for them, focusing on High Sensitivity not as an obstacle, but as a personality trait that can and should be valued. On this basis, this chapter aims to offer guidance on how to support highly sensitive students in Vocational Education and Training (VET) in the choice of their career and transition to professional life, presenting a series of advice and strategies that can be adopted by VET advisors, guidance counsellors, career mentors/coaches, teachers, and other professionals who might be interested in this field.

9. Specific strategies for advising Highly Sensitive students in VET



The approach proposed in this chapter starts by focusing on the importance of identifying HS students in the classroom and how to proceed when it comes to vocational and career counselling of these students.

In a general school context, and although this varies from country to country, not all students will mandatorily be guided by a VET advisor or career counsellor. In countries like Portugal, for example, although schools offer psychological support, students do not have any mandatory sessions with a guidance counsellor/advisor or psychologist. When a student needs support they can either book an appointment with a school counsellor or psychologist themselves or they can be referred, for example, by a teacher. Regardless of the situation in a particular country, the aim of this chapter is to support VET advisors and counsellors when it comes to the counselling of highly sensitive students, whether the students themselves have chosen to attend counselling or were referred by a teacher or other authority in the school.

For the elaboration of this chapter, two VET advisors were consulted and the strategies presented are based on their feedback and experience derived from guiding HS students. The first stage consists of an assessment to identify students with Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS). Then, strategies for Vocational and Career counselling for HSPs in VET will be addressed, followed by how to give feedback to HSPs in VET in the frame of career counselling and, lastly, how to monitor and evaluate the processes and outcomes of vocational/career counselling for HSP in VET.

9.1. Assessment

In the first place, it is important for VET counsellors to identify HS students. The second chapter of this guidebook focuses on the identification of HSPs at school and can be used by teachers or guidance counsellors as a reference for the identification of high sensitivity traits in their students. According to Aron's (2013) research on high sensitivity, the years of high school tend to be reported by HSP as the most difficult years in their lives, and one of the reasons for this to happen is the fact that there is pressure to make choices that will define their future, and this is a daunting task for any young person, but particularly if they are highly sensitive. Vocational advisors can certainly have an impact in helping young people navigate through this stage of their lives and choose a career that is rewarding for them.

The VET advisors consulted to produce this chapter agreed that on their typical approach to career counselling and guidance, which is to adopt a well-rounded strategy, by focusing on the student as a person, and working on building self-awareness, self-esteem, emotion regulation skills and coping mechanisms, which in turn will contribute towards the choice of a meaningful career. A well-rounded strategy is to focus on three methods, as described by Enache & Matei (2017). First, the focus should be on psychological counselling, which is helpful towards developing the student's self-awareness and promoting positive self-image and emotional stability. Then, on educational and academic counselling, which "facilitates the design of the educational route, school and career training" (Enache & Matei, 2017, p. 61) and last but not least, on career counselling and guidance, which involves facilitating the access to resources



and knowledge regarding the professional/educational options available to students, to facilitate their transition from VET to employment or further studies.

In this context, a VET advisor's strategy should start with a talking assessment. It is essential to determine whether a student is Highly Sensitive and how self-aware they are. It is important that the student knows himself or herself. This is supported by the study of Enache & Matei (2017), who argue that self-awareness and personal development should come hand in hand with the exploration of educational and professional opportunities. To assess high sensitivity and self-awareness, a talking assessment should be made by the VET advisor, and, in addition to this, validated psychometric tests can be applied. For high sensitivity the 27-item Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS), developed by Aron and Aron (1997) is recommended, as it is considered to have high internal reliability. It makes sense to ask the student to take this test if he or she presents characteristics of high sensitivity during an initial talking assessment. The characteristics have been mentioned in chapter two of this guidebook and include, for example, being more susceptible to triggers from the environment, such as noise, temperature, and light, being perceived as shy by teachers or peers, and being over-aroused when surrounded by many people (Aron, 2013).

Once a student is identified as being a HSP, the VET advisor can adapt their strategies and advice to this personality trait, taking a more hands-on approach to help a student choose a career path and solve any vocational problems. Part of this process is establishing one's priorities when it comes to a career, for example, whether the most important thing for a person is to help others, career progression, making a lot of money, or having a flexible schedule, but sometimes students are not yet fully conscious of their values and priorities, and need help to make sense of them. In this context, Aron (2010) recommends that an advisor/counsellor first hears what the students have to say concerning the difficulties that are contributing towards their struggle with vocational choice, in order to understand what traits need to be taken into consideration when advising them and what strengths to focus on. Aron (2010) also encourages career counselling using vocational testing and Myers-Briggs testing.

Vocational testing includes any instrument to assess a person's abilities, interests, personality traits, and other factors which are important to evaluate the aptitude towards a certain occupation (American Psychological Association, n.d.). There are many instruments available and VET advisors often already use a test of their preference, which is appropriate for their context and language. One recommendation is the California Occupational Preference System (COPS), which has the purpose of helping individuals to make an occupational choice, either vocationally or professionally oriented. This test shows high reliability, with test-retest reliability coefficients that ranged from .70 to .95 (White Papers, n.d.) and includes scoring for 14 clusters of occupations, skilled and professional. Another suggestion is the Motivational Appraisal Personal Potential (MAPP) test, which was created in 1995 and is a comprehensive online career test, with test-retest reliability outcomes for worker traits of 95 per cent.

Myers-Briggs testing has to do with a typology of personalities developed based on Carl Jung's psychological types. The Myers-Briggs typology has 16 types of personalities, based on a person's preferences concerning Introversi on/Extraversi on (preferring to focus on the inner vs.



outer world), Sensing/Intuition (whether a person prefers to focus on the basic information they take in or whether they interpret it and add meaning), Thinking/Feeling (preferring to first look at logic and consistency vs. at the people and special circumstances) and Judging/Perceiving (when looking at the outside world, preferring to get things decided vs. preferring to stay open to new information and options) (MBTI® Basics, n.d.). This instrument is very helpful to increase self-knowledge, and for each of the 16 personality types, possible career choices are provided.

Vocational testing, allied to Myers-Briggs testing will allow for the deeper self-knowledge of the highly sensible student, their values, talents and needs, and offers the possibility to form clusters of options that will guide young people to a certain scope, career-wise. In addition, it could also be useful to use aptitude tests, which typically focus on abilities (for example numerical reasoning, verbal reasoning, and abstract reasoning tests), as people often gravitate towards jobs/subjects they are innately good at.

Promoting the self-knowledge of students through testing assessment can be very useful to guide them towards the best career choice for them. Both VET advisors interviewed to write this chapter stated that it is dangerous to impose certain paths on students because they are typically associated with careers for HSPs. The advisor's role should be to promote self-knowledge and empower the student to know and accept themselves, avoiding negative discourses about themselves and to help the student choose their own path, considering what they learned about themselves and SPS. That is not to say that VET advisors cannot advise on possible career paths. Knowing what types of career options there are (their benefits and drawbacks) is advantageous for a student to choose a professional path, but VET advisors should present the option to the student in a mindful way, rather than impose any career paths because they are typically associated with HSP

9.2. Vocational and Career counselling strategies for HSPs in VET

A well-rounded strategy is to focus on three methods, as described by Enache & Matei (2017). First, the focus should be on psychological counselling, which is helpful towards developing the student's self-awareness and promoting positive self-image and emotional stability. Then, on educational and academic counselling, which "facilitates the design of the educational route, school and career training" (Enache & Matei, 2017, p. 61) and last but not least, on career counselling and guidance, which involves facilitating the access to resources and knowledge regarding the professional/educational options available to students, to facilitate their transition from VET to employment or further studies.

In this context, a VET advisor's strategy should start with an assessment, as previously mentioned, with a talking assessment, and asking the student to answer to HSPS questionnaire (Aron & Aron, 1997), to determine whether they are highly sensitive. Then, the VET advisor should continue with psychological counselling, helping the student become more aware of himself or herself. The VET advisors consulted mentioned that it is not rare for students to be solely concerned about their professional future, so it is important to focus on the student as a



person, and work on building self-awareness, self-esteem, emotion regulation skills and coping mechanisms.

For highly sensitive teenagers, chances are that they will struggle with overstimulation and consider themselves different from others, which can lead to low self-esteem. As such, building up self-esteem is also an important step towards a happier life and future. The VET advisors consulted to write this chapter highlighted that it is important to help VET students understand that high sensitivity should not be seen as a problem or a handicap, but rather as a personality trait with value. Highly sensitive people are likely to be empathetic, and conscientious, have a deep capacity to appreciate beauty, art and music, to be kind and compassionate (Zeff, 2004). These characteristics can be harnessed in meaningful careers. However, these traits are often not the most valued in the society we live in, which tends to value the aggressive pursuit of success, which leads highly sensitive people to often question whether there is something wrong with them. Nevertheless, as stated by Zeff (2004), it is important to appreciate one's sensitive nervous system and learn practical methods to deal with sensitivity, to identify and release false beliefs of being unfit or somehow defective.

A piece of advice offered by Aron (2013) is to not try to emulate non-HSP behaviour and accept one's high sensitivity. One's low self-esteem often derives from thinking they are different and therefore there is something wrong with them, however, this is not true. Instead of focusing on the negative aspects of high sensitivity, one should strive to slowly change their belief system to be gentle with oneself. For example, HSPs tend to be empathic, gentle, helpful, have a great of aesthetics, or a myriad of other qualities and values. When changing one's belief system to internalize positive values, one can increase inner peace and self-esteem (Aron, 2013). According to Cao (2021), when teenagers have a clearer sense of self-competence, they are also more resilient to stress.

Another area to focus on is positive coping strategies. Research shows that children and teenagers tend to use emotion-focusing coping strategies, as opposed to problem-focused coping, and that they actively learn coping mechanics during their teenage years, often by following in their parents' footsteps (Cao, 2021). Considering this, it's important to guide highly sensitive students to adopt positive coping strategies. Rebaciuc (2020), for example, proposed strategies for teachers who work with highly sensitive students, to improve their well-being, academic performance and quality of life. Some of these strategies can also be adopted by VET advisors as well, as it might be the case that a HS student is having doubts about their future career in part because of the challenges they feel when dealing with stressors at school.

One of the strategies to adopt to help HS students cope with intense events/situations is to advise them not to avoid these types of situations but to manage their emotions and turn them into something positive. There should be an effort to educate the student to become independent and aware of their potential. One of the tasks of the VET advisor is to raise awareness of mindfulness and relaxation techniques, namely by teaching students to control their breathing, to focus on whatever is happening at the moment and to anticipate possible future stressful situations (Rebaciuc, 2020). Because HSPs tend to process information very deeply, they react



more intensely to any kind of stimuli, leading to stress. Practising mindfulness and relaxation techniques can lead to higher resilience to stressors, particularly if it becomes a habit.

Another trait that can often be present in HSP is perfectionism. The need to complete every single task perfectly and worry about possible mistakes can be petrifying, leading to anxiety, procrastination, and self-doubt. An advisor can help a student combat perfectionism by, for example, guiding them to look at mistakes and failure as opportunities to learn and improve, helping them set realistic goals for their endeavours and reminding them to be kind to themselves and that mistakes are a sign of growth and not failure (D'Altorio, 2022).

Cao (2021) also provides a list of possible negative coping strategies that teenagers (or even adults) can sometimes adopt and positive strategies that can be adopted instead, leading to the change in values deemed so crucial by Aron (2013). The strategies are compiled in the following table:

Negative coping mechanisms	Positive coping strategies
Emotional Outbursts	Emotional Expression
Suppressing Emotions	Seeking Social and Informational Support
Self-Criticizing	Self-Calming Strategies
Blaming Others	Positive Thinking
Social Withdrawal	Cognitive Reframing
Denial	Acceptance

Table 3.1 - Negative and positive coping strategies³

The adoption of positive strategies to manage stressful situations can reinforce positive habits, increase emotional (and even physical) health, and contribute towards a happier and more peaceful life. Thus, it is important for VET advisors not only to guide highly sensitive students towards making choices when it comes to their careers but also in terms of self-knowledge, values and strategies to thrive in a world where highly sensitive people are a minority.

The second stage of counselling is educational and academic counselling, focusing on specific strategies with the aim of facilitating the transition between VET and access to the job market. Choosing a career is an important decision in a young person's life, particularly if the person is highly sensitive. Having high job satisfaction will naturally contribute towards higher life

³ Table adapted from: Cao, J. (4 de February de 2021). *How To Help Your Highly Sensitive Teen To Manage Stress*. Obtido de Mind Connections NYC: <https://mindconnectionsnyc.com/how-to-help-your-highly-sensitive-teen-to-manage-stress/>



satisfaction but choosing a career can be a particularly daunting task, and students can often benefit from career counselling.

In this context, it's important to understand that VET advisors know that HSPs typically respond to various types of stimuli, whether physical, mental or emotional, in an acute manner, so it makes sense to choose a career that offers an appropriate degree of stimulation and draws from the strengths of a HSP. Whatever career a HSP chooses, they should avoid overstimulation. HSPs are often driven by a desire to do well, which leads them to choose careers which have to do with "righting some wrong" in society (Aron, 2013, p. 173), however, these can sometimes be too stimulating or distressing for them. There must be a balance between working in something meaningful yet not overstimulating. In fact, Aron (2013) argues that jobs where HSPs are placed in situations that are almost hopeless, like confrontations with cruel people or dealing with victims that cannot be helped very much, are not ideal for HSP and there are alternative positions that are better suited and less stressful, such as roles that require consulting, strategizing or support, as opposed to being in the "front line". In addition to overstimulation Poikolainen (n.d.) mentions the following problems that affect HSPs in their careers, such as physical and/or emotional overload, time pressure, meaningless work (HSP tend to thrive in jobs where they feel like their efforts have a purpose), toxic workplace cultures, boredom and jobs that do not provide a good life-work balance.

Finding a healthy balance in a career is key for a HSP to thrive at work. It is important for the VET advisor to highlight the fact that HSPs have a lot of strengths as employees, for example, they are detail-oriented, attentive to ethics and quality, they are deeply empathetic, listen to others and have great intuition. In the words of Aron (2010, p. 142) "highly sensitive can do almost any job, if they can do it their own way". Whatever job a HS student chooses for their future, it must be meaningful for them, as it's in their nature to reflect upon the tasks they perform (Romeu, n.d.). Knowing what to avoid in a career is part of the journey towards choosing a rewarding career for a HSP, but what kinds of careers are appropriate? There are countless options, but Sólo (2018) makes a series of recommendations based on the characteristics of HSP and what makes them thrive. Although, as mentioned before, VET advisors should not impose a path for a student, sometimes it is useful for a student to get specific examples of careers they could choose, supporting career counselling and guidance with "knowledge of the options available in the labour market in areas of interest to students" (Enache & Matei, 2017, p. 61). In this context, the VET advisor could present some of the following options:

- First, HSPs tend to do well in caring professions, where they can use their empathy, intuition and awareness to help others. These include healthcare professions, such as being a nurse, doctor, or physical therapist, as well as professions like social worker, psychotherapist, and personal coach.
- Another interesting area for HSP is creative work, which includes professions where HSP can exercise their talents and artistic skills. Some examples of careers include graphic designer, copywriter, animator, movie set designer, painter, and writer.
- HSP are also often interested in academia and research. In this area, they can do meaningful work, focus on research, contribute to the creation of knowledge and maybe also teach and help students.



- Careers that require precision are also a good option for HSP. HSPs tend to process information efficiently, so they might be successful in jobs that require data analysis or slow and detail-oriented work. They could also do well in positions that are tech savvy, such as software engineer or website developer. Many technology jobs often offer more relaxed work environments and the possibility of working remotely, which tends to be something HSP do well in.

Aron (2013) also claims that self-employment is often a good choice for HSP, as it allows for better control of aspects such as the number of hours worked, the stimulation, and the people who one deals with. Although this is likely not the ideal career path for a student who is looking to find a career/further studies to pursue, it can be a goal to consider and work towards.

Once a student has a better awareness of themselves, their knowledge and competencies, the VET advisor can help them establish goals and the steps to achieve their goals. To decide on a realistic and achievable goal, the mnemonic SMART can be used, meaning that a goal should be Specific, Measurable, Attractive, Realistic and Time-Bound (Nathan & Hill, 2006) (see Table 3.2 for explanation).

Specific	The goal should be something specific and achievable. It should be possible to answer the question ‘How?’ concerning this goal.
Measurable	The goal should be verifiable. They should be able to say “I will have achieved my goal when...”
Attractive	The goal should be aimed at something important and attractive for the student.
Realistic	The goal should not be impossible or too difficult to achieve, as this can lead to a loss of motivation.
Time-Bound	Setting a time limit to achieve a goal can help the student develop a sense of focus and motivation to achieve the goal.

Table 3.2 - SMART goals⁴The VET advisor can help the student decide on the goals and provide feedback and monitor the said goal. Strategies to do so are provided in the next section.

9.3. Feedback and Monitoring

Having the strategies to provide psychological and career counselling is extremely important, but the feedback and monitoring process should also be the target of VET advisors’ attention and strategy, namely when it comes to receiving and giving feedback in the frame of career counselling, and the follow-up of the student's journey and achievement (or lack of) of the proposed goals.

⁴ Table adapted from: Nathan, R., & Hill, L. (2006). Chapter 9 - Self-management for Career Counsellors. In *Career Counselling* (pp. 141-149). London: SAGE Publications.



Starting with feedback, the feedback given by the VET advisor should aim at encouraging VET students “to acquire transferable work-related skills and become critical thinkers, creative problem solvers and skilled decision makers” (Kobus, 2015, p. 17). In the words of one the VET advisors interviewed, the feedback given to the student should be “simple, pragmatic, constructive and realistic”, it should not deny the reality of the student’s situation, but rather make them reflect on it and find new competencies or possibilities in themselves. The VET advisor should also strive to “respond in ways that build and maintain rapport to encourage continuation of the dialogue” (Reid, 2008, p. 478) and ask them open questions that will add information to the conversation, helping the student create a positive narrative for their future career that will help manage the present and work to make positive changes.

When it comes to monitoring and giving feedback on the outcomes of counselling to students, this tends to be a longer-term process. The results of career counselling are not easily quantifiable, which adds complexity to the process of assessing career counselling (Nathan & Hill, 2006), meaning that it’s usually hard to see immediate benefits from career counselling, because changes, especially when it comes to career, tend to happen gradually, over a period of time. Additionally, when it comes to the assessment of the student, the changes can be external (e.g., the student makes a smooth transition from their studies to their chosen career) or internal (the student gains more confidence in himself or herself) and therefore difficult to measure with rigour. Nathan & Hill (2006) state that career counselling is typically a short-term process and typically the end is in sight from the beginning of the arranged session. Sometimes, to follow up on the student, review meetings can be useful, either to recognise successes, review the strategy or discuss the progress made so far. To monitor and receive feedback on outcomes, at least one year is usually necessary, because, as previously mentioned, the goals established in career counselling tend to take some time to achieve. Nathan & Hill (2006) propose questions to ask at one-year follow-up for adults who have had career counselling, but these can be adapted to VET students. Thus, a follow-up session could discuss details of their school life/training, their work experience (for example in internships), how they feel about their functions and responsibilities and how they feel regarding the achievement of the goal(s) they set for themselves.

The student should also be encouraged to provide feedback to the VET advisor. When it comes to receiving feedback on one’s own practice, in addition to asking for oral feedback (which a HS student might be reluctant to give), a VET advisor can make use of a Counselling evaluation form, asking whether the student’s expectations of career counselling were met, to what extent, what they gained from it, how they could have gained more and whether they would recommend it to others (Nathan & Hill, 2006, p. 144), adding other questions they might feel are relevant to improve their practice as a VET advisor and continue to help students in their journey of self-knowledge and setting of career goals.

3. Summary

Vocational Education and Training advisors can benefit from several strategies to advise and guide Highly Sensitive VET students towards increasing self-knowledge, positive coping mechanisms and the pursuit of a career or further studies that play to their strengths such as emotional intelligence, appreciation for beauty and art, conscientiousness, attention to detail, and avoiding careers that will overwhelm them. Through different sections, this chapter focuses on strategies that can be used by VET advisors to support their students and guide them toward career goals.

Starting by explaining what is High Sensitivity in VET, the first section explores the challenges of adolescence and the lack of preparation to transition smoothly through this phase of students' lives into a fulfilling future occupation. The second section is the core of this chapter, where strategies for Highly Sensitive students in VET are provided. The proposed approach focuses on the importance of assessment and identifying HS students in the classroom and how to proceed when it comes to vocational and career counselling of these students.

Based on the feedback and experience of the two VET advisors consulted for this research, a sub-section was dedicated to the assessment, i.e., strategies that will focus on the student as a person. The strategy should start with a talking assessment to determine if the student is Highly Sensitive and how self-aware of it they are. Then, vocational testing should be carried on, so the advisor can adapt and advise considering the student's abilities, interests, personality traits and other factors. This way, students' self-knowledge will be promoted rather than imposing a certain path on them.

The next sub-section addresses vocational and career counselling strategies for HSPs in VET, where three methods of a well-rounded strategy are mentioned: psychological counselling, educational and academic counselling and career counselling and guidance. VET advisors' strategy should start with an assessment, talking assessment and HSPS questionnaires, always making sure to the student that high sensitivity is a personality trait with very positive aspects that they shall appreciate. It is also important to guide students into positive coping strategies and emotional management. VET advisors should focus on specific strategies to facilitate the transition between VET and access to the job market, help students find a healthy career balance, and highlight their strengths as HSPs' future employees.

The third sub-section regards Feedback and Monitoring. VET advisors must target their attention to the feedback and monitoring process besides providing psychological and career counselling. The feedback given by the VET advisor should aim at encouraging VET students "to acquire transferable work-related skills and become critical thinkers, creative problem solvers and skilled decision makers" (Kobus, 2015, p. 17). When it comes to monitoring and giving feedback on the outcomes of counselling to students, this tends to be a longer-term process. The student should be followed-up, and the details of their school life/training should be discussed, as well as their work experience, and how they feel about their responsibilities and goals. In addition to asking for oral feedback, a Counselling evaluation form can also be shared with the student to evaluate their progress.

These strategies can be used by VET advisors to support Highly Sensitive students and guide them into setting career goals. They will allow the increase of students' self-knowledge,



positive coping mechanisms and strengths, developing their potential and integration into society.

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Mentoring and coaching a highly sensitive person at work: strategies and tools

“by Coach and mentor Lian Kirksæther”

Abstract:



Highly sensitive persons are valuable to a company, and in this chapter, you get tips for managing a highly sensitive employee. You learn how management can be a supportive factor through mentoring and coaching highly sensitive employees. This chapter is valuable for all kinds of managers in different companies and organisations and for everyone working in collaboration with others.

Keywords

Coaching highly sensitive employee, mentoring highly sensitive employee, Strategies for highly sensitive employees, Tools for highly sensitive employees, Coaching highly sensitive persons

Get the unique competence of highly sensitive employees

Highly sensitive employees are unique, generally hard-working and of great value to the company (Bergsma, 2021). As a manager, HR manager, vocational or career counsellor you will learn how you as a coach or mentor can help highly sensitive employees see their own value, increase their self-esteem and help them understand how to respect their own needs. This chapter is going to give you the purpose and understanding of how effective coaching and mentoring of highly sensitive employees can be.

With awareness and understanding as a coach and mentor, you will be able to help the highly sensitive person to utilize their unique characteristics and to succeed in their career. You will be able to give them more space and the possibility to work independently in a supported quiet, environment. A highly sensitive employee who enjoys their work is usually a well-informed and balanced decision-maker who brings value to the company (Acevedo et al., 2014; Pluess, 2015; Pluess et al., 2020).

A mentor is someone who sees more talent and ability within you, than you see in yourself, and helps bring it out of you (Great People Have Great Mentors, 2023).

A coach and a mentor need to be open-minded and understanding of highly sensitive personality traits. Some of you might want to help the highly sensitive person to be stronger and overcome the sensitivity, but this will only make it worse and the job more difficult for the highly sensitive person. As a coach or a mentor, you have to remember that the high-sensitivity personality trait is a part of the person. Highly sensitive people generally process information deeply, have lots of empathy, are more sensitive to subtle changes and cues around them, and become more easily overstimulated than non-sensitive people (Aron, 1996).

As a manager, HR manager, vocational or career counsellor coaching or mentoring a highly sensitive person you have to know that it is a challenge for highly sensitive persons to set boundaries for themselves, colleagues, customers, managers and tasks that have to be done at work. The highly sensitive employee tends to say yes when they should say no. As a coach or a mentor, you can help the employee to determine their own boundaries (Kirksæther, 2019).



Also, be aware that highly sensitive persons usually tend to react more to criticism. You need to have this in mind when you are giving your highly sensitive employees feedback. It is also important to be calm and use a nice tone while you are giving feedback. This is important for everyone but even more so for the highly sensitive persons.

Because of their sensitivity, the employees are sensing more of what happens in the environment at work which can be a challenge, but it is also a great strength and gives a lot of possibilities for the employee in their job (Pluess, 2015).

The lists below highlight the challenges highly sensitive people often face in the workplace, in addition to showing how they can be assets in the workplace when the environment is favourable (Bergsma, 2021).

Challenges for highly sensitive persons at work:

- Negative environment
- Noise at the workplace or from colleagues
- Light and temperature
- Meaningless tasks
- Lack of independence
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Criticism
- Stress

Highly sensitive persons who thrive at work:

- Professionally skilled
- Sees the whole picture
- Show genuine interest in what they are doing
- Unfold their creativity
- Good decision-makers
- Creative and detail-oriented
- Tend to be conscientious, accurate and have analytical skills
- Good at processing large amounts of information
- Have a strong sense of responsibility
- They are quick at identifying patterns
- Good at finding solutions
- Well-balanced decision-maker
- Are caring, emphatic and fair
- Think outside the box

How to be the best coach or mentor for a highly sensitive employee



Coaching is a conversation technique and collaborative project where highly sensitive employees discover the answers themselves through answering questions (Abrahamsson & Kirksæther, 2013; Ledernytt, 2019). You help them to retrieve answers and directions that are needed, while you focus on opportunities and how situations can be resolved.

As a manager, HR manager, vocational or career counsellor coach, be conscious that the highly sensitive person is obtaining more information than just your words. They are masters in seeing subtle changes in you, your voice, your body language and other things happening in the room (Pluess, 2015).

While coaching, you must not be preoccupied with the details of the problems. One should not avoid talking about problems, nor let the problems become the sole focus. By thinking ahead, it becomes easier to find solutions to challenges, which easily results in the employee becoming increasingly motivated.

Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximize their performance. It's helping them to learn rather than teaching them (Malakoudis, 2022).

In a coaching conversation, you support and build the strength of the person being coached, into being their best self (Fylling, 2022). During the coaching, it is important not to force solutions on anyone. As a manager and coach, you need to respect the highly sensitive employee and be open to the fact that people are unique and different. The purpose of coaching is to help the highly sensitive employee find good solutions on how they can better perform their job while at the same time feeling their best at work.

As a manager, HR manager, vocational or career counsellor being a mentor for your highly sensitive employee means that you use many of the same skills as a coach, but you also share your experience and knowledge and act as an adviser to your employee. If you have knowledge of high sensitivity, in addition to your knowledge and experience from the company, this will provide better help for your highly sensitive employee. It is nevertheless important that you see the employee without judgement and convey your wisdom in a good, empathetic, and clear way, responding to where the highly sensitive employee needs guidance (Abrahamsson & Kirksæther, 2013; Kirksæther, 2019).

As a mentor and a coach, it is even more important to know what high sensitivity is, in addition to knowing about the D.O.E.S in connection with high sensitivity (Aron, 1996).

D - Depth of Processing

Highly sensitive people obtain more information from their surroundings and process it on a deeper level.

O – Overstimulation

The highly sensitive person notices lots of the subtle details in their environment and therefore easily gets overstimulated.



E - Emotional Reactivity

Highly sensitive people feel positive and negative emotions more intensely than non-highly sensitive people.

S - Sensing the Subtle

Highly sensitive persons notice details such as nonverbal gestures and tiny changes in the environment.

Whether you choose to be a coach, mentor, or a combination, it is important to be a good supporter with a lot of empathy, especially for highly sensitive employees when you are contributing to their development.

Start the conversation by creating a good atmosphere and ask questions in an empathic and nice way. This is even more important to a highly sensitive employee than to other employees. Be genuinely interested when you are listening to them. Being a highly sensitive person can be overwhelming at work. As you are mentoring an employee you guide and support them towards being the best version of themselves at work. Share your experience and knowledge in the process of mentoring.

Coach

- Use conversation technique
- Ask powerful questions
- Enhances self-awareness
- Does not require expertise in the area

Mentor

- Sharing your experiences and knowledge
- Provides advice and guidance
- Knowledge and experience required

Case study

Emily didn't think her manager would understand her

When Emily contacted me, she was tired and frustrated, in addition to feeling stressed and overstimulated. She had been working for a while at the same company, where she found her position interesting and enjoyable. Initially, she wanted to remain in this job in the future. However, Emily did not feel respected by her colleagues and was tired of sharing creative ideas with people who did not understand her. In addition, her colleagues had a close



relationship and while working they were constantly loudly together, which disturbed Emily's ability to concentrate.

During our first conversation, it became clear she found the situation so unbearable that she considered leaving, even though the job was perfect for her. Emily explained that she did not believe her manager would understand her struggles, which was why she contacted me, a coach, instead. At work, she did not feel respected by either the manager or several of her colleagues. Whenever she shared new thoughts and ideas it often ended with her colleagues laughing. Her ideas were not adopted or taken seriously until one of her colleagues came up with the same or a similar idea a few months later when suddenly the manager had a positive attitude towards the new idea.

Together we worked with various coaching questions and techniques, and from there it emerged that Emily was highly sensitive. As a sensitive person, she experienced her traits as challenging rather than giving her strength. Through the coaching, she started to learn boundary-setting for herself and others. This made Emily understand that, among other things, while she had been annoyed by noisy colleagues, she had not done anything about it. Instead, her stress level increased, and she became more irritated.

As we continued working on her sensitivity, Emily gradually began to see the situation in a new way. She became aware of her boundaries, and in what scenarios she felt it important to speak up to her loud colleagues or walk away and take a break. During the coaching sessions, Emily became increasingly aware of her sensitivity, both in relation to the challenging sides of being sensitive and her strong sensitive sides. She understood that it made her more sensitive in many areas, especially on the days she was tired. Emily suddenly realized that she had unconsciously interpreted the feedback from her manager and colleagues negatively, rather than only listening to the words. This resulted in her starting to listen better to what her co-workers said, instead of interpreting it.

Through our coaching, Emily learned more about her sensitivity and understood what resources she had within herself as a highly sensitive person. These resources proved to be important both in her day-to-day life and in her job. When Emily started respecting her boundaries and communicating better, she ended up using new ways to convey ideas to her manager and colleagues.

After a while, she decided to have a meeting with her manager, whom Emily believed did not respect her as an employee or person. In the meeting, Emily chose to be honest and explained the challenges she was facing at work and the coaching sessions with me. In the meeting, she was taken seriously by her manager, and he wanted to help her in order to improve collaboration at work. As a result, they agreed to have regular meetings where the manager would coach her.

What had previously been a problem for Emily started to become her strength as she gained a new understanding of her sensitivity. When we later discussed this situation, she no longer felt like the same person, rather she had experienced personal growth.



In the time following, Emily focused on her strong sensitive sides through action, and with these major positive changes started happening for her. At work, she was respected and part of the team, in addition to being listened to whenever she shared her thoughts. The following year, to Emily's surprise, she was named employee of the year.

Many highly sensitive employees notice subtleties in the environment, especially the noise that surrounds them either from colleagues or other sources (Bergsma, 2021). Other subtle changes in the environment such as light, smell or temperature can be a problem, even though it's not registered by colleagues. By having a conversation with the highly sensitive employee and asking them what changes are needed to the workplace, the highly sensitive employee will function better at work (Abrahamsson & Kirksæther, 2013).

10 Tips to get the best of highly sensitives employees:

1. Create a thriving environment for the highly sensitive employees
2. Help the employee determine their boundaries
3. Give the employee more freedom and flexible hours
4. Possibilities to take breaks and quiet time when needed
5. Use Employees - a model based on trust and good values
6. Help them structure and make plans so they are prepared
7. See each highly sensitive person as an individual
8. Give them time to absorb before they have to respond
9. Be even more aware of giving criticism in a good way
10. Help them to cope in situations that are overstimulating

Get the best tools for coaching a highly sensitive person at work

By using the various coaching tools listed below when coaching or mentoring a highly sensitive employee, you can effectively help the employee maximise their potential in the workplace (Abrahamsson & Kirksæther, 2013; Fylling, 2022; Kirksæther, 2019; Erickson Coaching International, 2023).

Coaching questions about job

About the work:

How do you feel about your work?

What do you enjoy most about your job?

What are the biggest challenges in your job?

How are you doing when it comes to stress and being overstimulated at work?

What can we do to get it better?

The tasks:



What do you think about your job tasks, and are they meaningful to you?

How do you feel about independence at work?
How could we do the task more independently?

Colleagues:

How do you feel about your colleagues?

What can be done to get it even better?

The environment:

How do you experience the environment?

What are the best aspects of the environment?

How can we make the environment better?

Focus forward:

What are you most proud of in terms of the work you do?

What more are you proud of?
What changes do you want to make going forward?

Why is this important to you?

What would you like to focus more on regarding your work?

Boundaries

A challenging for the highly sensitive employees

Setting boundaries is about more than just saying no. A lot of highly sensitive people have challenges setting boundaries for themselves, colleagues, customers, manager and their tasks (Ledernytt, 2019; Kirksæther, 2019). They easily say yes to working overtime and doing more tasks. Sometimes it is okay to say yes to these things but remember that highly sensitive employees often have difficulty setting their boundaries.

Boundaries at work

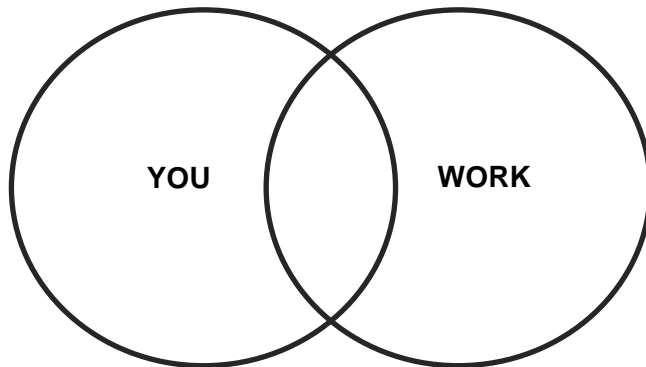


Figure 1.1

In figure 1.1

You see the best situation for the highly sensitive employee. You are connected to your work, but also true to yourself. You are confident and set boundaries for yourself and others when it is necessary

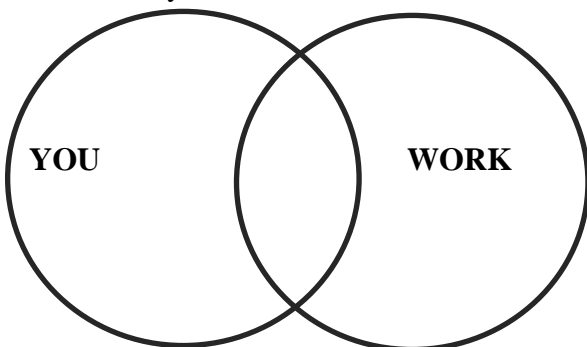


Figure 1.2

In figure 1.2

There is a situation that is toxic for the highly sensitive employee. Here you have problems setting boundaries for yourself and others at work. The job is taking a lot of you and your time and continuing like this will lead you to exhaustion and burnout.

If your sensitive employee has problems creating boundaries, here are some important questions to ask them when coaching. Further down there is an exercise called “*Important – Not important*”, which will help your employees see tasks they need to prioritise.



Awareness Question – Time Thieves

How do you experience your workdays?

Where do you spend too much time or too little time in relation to your job?

What time thieves are taking up your workday?

Where are your time opportunities?

What part of the day are you most productive?

And what time of day are you least productive and what is the reason for that?

Who or what controls your working hours?

If possible, how can you take control of any of this?

What causes you the most interruptions during the working day?

What patterns do you see today that are good or bad?

Are there any of these patterns that should be changed, and if so which ones?

What can you eliminate from your schedule that is not truly important to you?

What do you want to put into your working day schedule? When you have decided, write it down in a priority list.

Important and not important

The next exercise is about tasks both within and outside your control. If the highly sensitive employee can use 10 minutes every workday to focus on prioritizing the tasks into important and not important, it will make them better at following through with their work tasks.

Is this task something you need to do, use your time on, or think about? If someone else is responsible for this task or area of work, you should not put time towards it. In addition, things that happen continuously but are unimportant, such as telephones, e-mail, and disturbance from colleagues, should not take time from prioritized tasks.

Important

Not important

Tasks within your control

Tasks outside your control

Scaling 1-10

This is a powerful and simple technique that is useful for a highly sensitive employee. Using the scale will often clarify the challenges and help the employee focus on the next step towards their goal. The scale is useful for various work tasks and challenges in relation to an employee's job.



Start with a short introduction to the scale. 1 either means that you are starting your task, or that it is a big problem at the moment. When you are at 10 you have successfully reached your goal. When I ask you the questions, just tell me the first number that pops into your head.

Fig 1.3

1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5 ___ 6 ___ 7 ___ 8 ___ 9 ___ 10

Where are you on the scale in relation to this?

What is the reason that you did not choose the number below?

Where would you prefer to be on the scale in relation to this?

What does it take to get one number higher on the scale?

What else is important for you to do now?

So, after you have done this, where are you on the scale?

What would be the first step (or the most important one) to start with?

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have been talking about mentoring and coaching a highly sensitive person at work, the importance of being open-minded and understanding how to take care of their needs. You learned how management can be a supportive factor through mentoring and coaching highly sensitive employees.

From reading about the case study about Emily, you saw how she changed from being tired, frustrated, and overstimulated, to being the employee of the year. With coaching, help and understanding from her manager, she regained her sense of self and started using her unique strength. She finally understood herself as a hardworking highly sensitive employee, and with that, she became of great value to the company. Maybe you got employees similar to Emily, who just need some coaching or mentoring to be valuable employees.

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