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Employee to Entrepreneur Transition Experiences of Sri Lankan Youth: A Schlossberg 4S Perspective

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Abstract

Entrepreneurial career transitions have been widely studied; yet existing research largely adopts intention-based perspectives, offering limited insight into how individuals experience and navigate the transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship, particularly in Global South contexts. Addressing this gap, this study examines (1) what motivates young individuals to initiate this transition and (2) how they adapt to it through Schlossberg's Transition Theory and its 4S framework (Situation, Self, Support, Strategies). A qualitative research design was employed, drawing on ten semi-structured interviews with young entrepreneurs (aged 18–30) in Sri Lanka who had transitioned from paid employment to entrepreneurship. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, with inductive mapping onto the 4S framework. The findings reveal that entrepreneurial transitions are initiated by dissatisfaction-driven situational triggers, together with aspirations for autonomy and self-fulfillment. Adaptation is shaped by the interaction among self-resources, relational support systems, and adaptive coping strategies, including selective social engagement, staged financial risk-taking, and learning-by-doing. The study extends Schlossberg's framework by demonstrating that strategic actions as a key mechanism through which resources translated into and successful adaptation, thereby positioning entrepreneurial entry as a dynamic transition process rather than a discrete decision.

Keywords: Youth Entrepreneurship, Schlossberg's 4S Framework, Paid Employment-to-Entrepreneurship Transition, Global South Context, Qualitative Study

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Introduction

Career is commonly defined as the unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time (Lane & Lee, 2018). Traditionally, careers were viewed as linear and organisation-bound, emphasizing upward mobility within a single occupational path. However, contemporary career scholarship conceptualises careers as dynamic and boundary-less, characterised by movement across organisations, occupations, industries, and even national contexts (Lane & Lee, 2018). As a result, career transitions have become an increasingly central feature of modern working lives, shaping individuals' identity, income stability, and overall well-being (Akay & Yilmaz, 2025; Kesse, 2015). Therefore, individuals are now more likely to experience multiple transitions across their lifespan, including shifts between fundamentally different career domains (Boveda & Metz, 2016; Fouad & Bynner, 2008).

Within this broader context of career fluidity, entrepreneurship has emerged as a significant alternative career pathway. The literature suggests that individuals are increasingly exercising agency in navigating career choices, with a growing tendency to move from paid employment to entrepreneurial pursuits (Inkson et al., 2012; Maheshwari & Kha, 2023; Raffiee & Feng, 2014). Empirical evidence indicates that a substantial proportion of employed individuals engage in entrepreneurial activity during their careers (Reynolds & Curtin, 2008). Recent global evidence also indicates a sustained rise in early-stage entrepreneurial activity, particularly among younger populations (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2023), reinforcing the relevance of entrepreneurship as a contemporary career pathway. In the Sri Lankan context, entrepreneurship represents a substantial component of employment, with total employment reaching approximately 8.1–8.2 million individuals in 2025 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2025). A significant proportion of this workforce is engaged in informal and self-employment activities, with recent estimates indicating that over 40% of total employment consists of self-employment and that a majority of workers operate within the informal sector (Department of Census and Statistics, 2025). In the aftermath of recent economic and labour market disruptions, entrepreneurship is increasingly being viewed as a viable and often necessary career pathway, particularly among youth experiencing uncertain labour market conditions.

The existing research has approached this phenomenon through several fragmented perspectives. Career-related scholarship primarily interprets such transitions as alternative career routes triggered by limited advancement opportunities

within paid employment (Chudzikowski, 2012; Leitch & Harrison, 2017; Raffiee & Feng, 2014; Sørensen & Sharkey, 2014). A second stream, grounded in status passage and identity perspectives, emphasises role transitions and identity reconfiguration during entrepreneurial entry (Barley, 1989; Dobrev & Barnett, 2005; Hoang & Gimeno, 2010). A third stream within mainstream entrepreneurship research explains entrepreneurial entry through motivation-based, intention-based, and resource-based frameworks, focusing on why individuals engage in entrepreneurship and who is more likely to do so (Amaral & Baptista, 2007; Blumberg & Pfann, 2016; Duong, 2022; Gieure et al., 2020; Harima et al., 2021).

Though the above streams of literature provide valuable insights on career transitions of youth, they collectively tend to conceptualise entrepreneurial entry as a discrete decision point or outcome rather than an evolving career transition process. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to how individuals experience, interpret, and adapt to the transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship over time (de Klerk et al., 2025; Lee e al., 2021). In particular, existing frameworks inadequately capture how individuals manage transition-related uncertainties, mobilise personal and contextual resources, and adjust to changing roles and identities throughout the process of transition (de Klerk et al., 2025).

To address this limitation, the current study draws on Schlossberg's transition theory, which conceptualizes transitions as dynamic or evolving processes involving changes in roles, routines, relationships, and assumptions (Schlossberg, 1981). Central to this framework is the 4S system which includes Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies, explaining how individuals cope with and adapt to transitions based on contextual conditions, personal characteristics, available support systems, and coping responses. Although widely applied in adult development and career transition research (de Klerk et al., 2025), the application of this framework to paid employment-to-entrepreneurship transitions remains limited, particularly within developing country contexts such as Sri Lanka

Addressing this gap, the present study explores the transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship among Sri Lankan youth as an evolving career process. The focus is on unmarried individuals aged 18–30 in the Western Province, a group representing early-career actors with relatively fewer structural constraints and higher exposure to labour market uncertainty, which provides a theoretically

relevant context for understanding early-stage entrepreneurial transitions (de Klerk et al., 2025; Mussagulova et al., 2023). Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What motivates young individuals to initiate the transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship?
2. How do the elements of Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies shape their adaptation during this transition?

By addressing these two questions, the study makes three key contributions. First, it extends career and entrepreneurship literature by re-conceptualising entrepreneurial entry as a processual transition, demonstrating how individuals move through evolving phases of adjustment rather than making a one-time decision, thereby shifting the analytical focus from entry outcomes to transition experiences (Akkermans & Tosti-Kharas, 2025; Sullivana & Arissb, 2021). Second, the study operationalises Schlossberg's transition theory within an entrepreneurial context by empirically mapping the four dimensions, namely, Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies, onto the paid employment-to-entrepreneurship transition, illustrating how these factors interact to shape individuals' adaptation trajectories under conditions of uncertainty. Third, the study provides contextually grounded insights into Sri Lankan youth entrepreneurship, revealing how structural conditions, limited institutional support, and early-career constraints influence transition experiences, thereby offering practical implications.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature and elaborates the theoretical framework underpinning the study. This is followed by the methodology, which outlines the research design and data collection approach. The subsequent section presents the findings, organised around the 4S framework, followed by a discussion of the key insights. The paper concludes with the theoretical and practical implications of the study, as well as directions for future research.

Literature Review

Career and Career Transition

Careers are traditionally conceptualised as linear, hierarchical, and upward progression (Lips-Wiersma & Hall, 2007) within organisations. In this traditional

view, career success was closely linked to stability and progression within a single occupational path. However, contemporary career scholarship highlights that careers are becoming increasingly dynamic, boundary-less, and characterised by mobility across organizations, occupations, and career domains (Lane & Lee, 2018). Career outcomes are also closely linked to identity, status, and personal well-being (Alkhelil, 2016).

Within this evolving context, career transitions have become a central feature of modern working life. Individuals frequently move across occupational roles or make complete career changes over time (de Klerk et al., 2025; Fouad & Bynner, 2008). One increasingly prominent form of transition is the movement from paid employment to entrepreneurial careers, reflecting growing career fluidity and individual agency in career decision-making (Krieger et al., 2021).

Entrepreneurship is defined as the process of creating and managing new ventures by mobilizing skills, time, and effort to generate value and innovation (Diandra & Azmy, 2020; Sarasvathy, 2004). Accordingly, entrepreneurial career transition refers to the shift from paid employment into entrepreneurship as a primary career pathway (Krieger et al., 2021; Stenard, 2019). This transition is shaped by multiple factors, including individual attributes, prior experience, cognitive traits, and contextual conditions (Ardichvili et al., 2003; Dobrev & Barnett, 2005; Kumar et al., 2025; Ramos et al., 2022; Rider et al., 2019).

Transitions to Entrepreneurship- Motivations and Structural Drivers

Existing research explains entrepreneurial transitions largely through three dominant, but interconnected, perspectives: push–pull motivation models, human capital theory, and intention-based approaches. Push–pull frameworks suggest that entrepreneurial entry is influenced by both negative “push” factors (e.g., job dissatisfaction, limited career advancement, or employment instability) and positive “pull” factors such as autonomy, independence, and financial opportunity (Alstete, 2003; Cassar, 2007; Dobrev & Barnett, 2005; Stenard, 2019). Financial gain and status improvement are also recognized as motivating influences, although not always the primary drivers (DeMartino & Barbato, 2003; Kumar et al., 2025; Rosa & Dawson, 2006).

Human capital perspectives emphasise that education, skills, and prior work experience enhance individuals’ ability to recognise and exploit entrepreneurial

opportunities (Kolvereid, 1996; Mazzarol et al., 1999). Recent research further highlights hybrid entrepreneurial pathways, where individuals combine paid employment and entrepreneurial activity to gradually transition into business ownership (Ramya et al., 2025). Intention-based models, particularly the Theory of Planned Behavior, conceptualise entrepreneurial entry as a planned behavioral outcome shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Lee et al., 2021; Tseng et al., 2022). Similarly, entrepreneurial event theory explains entry as a response to triggering events that shift perceptions of feasibility and desirability (St-Jean & Duhamel, 2020).

While the above perspectives provide important insights into why individuals become entrepreneurs, they conceptualise entrepreneurship predominantly as a decision outcome rather than a lived transition process, thereby limiting our understanding of how individuals experience and adapt to this shift over time. In this context, recent research has increasingly begun viewing entrepreneurship as a dynamic and processual transition involving identity change, psychological adaptation, and coping over time (Chetty & Fourie, 2025; de Klerk et al., 2025). These studies highlight that entrepreneurial transition involves experiencing uncertainty, restructuring identities, and developing adaptive strategies in response to changing contexts. However, much of this literature still emphasises outcomes such as entry, survival, or success, rather than the experience of transition itself.

Individual and Relational Resources in Entrepreneurial Transition

The term "resources" refers to various assets, factors, and elements that individuals can utilise to effectively navigate and accomplish a successful transition from one career path (such as employment) to another (such as an entrepreneurial career) (Dickinson et al., 1984). These resources encompass a wide range of tangible and intangible components that can aid individuals in adapting to the new career context and achieving their goals. Some of the most commonly cited resources are discussed below.

Successful entrepreneurial transition is often shaped by access to multiple resource types. At the individual level, socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, education, and experience influence entrepreneurial readiness and decision-making (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Joensuu-Salo et al., 2015; Kolvereid, 1996). Personality characteristics such as risk-taking propensity, locus of control, self-efficacy, and

resilience also play a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial behavior (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Kaiser, 1990; Markman & Baron, 2003; Sefiani, 2013; Rajini et al., 2025).

At the relational level, family support, mentorship, and social networks provide emotional encouragement, knowledge access, and sometimes, even financial assistance, that facilitate transition processes (Ramos et al., 2022; Sharif et al., 2017; Verheul et al., 2006). Financial resources, including savings, loans, and access to entrepreneurial ecosystems such as incubators and accelerators, further enable venture initiation and sustainability (Fisher et al., 2020; Koopman, 2013; Pandey et al., 2025). These resources do not operate independently but interact dynamically within transition processes.

Sri Lankan Youth Entrepreneurship

In Sri Lanka, entrepreneurship represents an important component of the labour market, particularly in the context of youth employment challenges and economic uncertainty. Recent Labour Force Survey data (2025) indicate a large share of the workforce engaged in entrepreneurship and informal economic activities, reflecting the continued importance of entrepreneurial pathways in the national economy.

Existing Sri Lankan studies on entrepreneurship have focused primarily on entrepreneurial intention, opportunity recognition, and barriers to entry among youth and graduates. For example, prior research (e.g. Atapattu & Kulasekara, 2026; Nishantha & Fernando, 2020) has highlighted the influence of financial constraints, limited access to capital, and institutional barriers as key challenges affecting youth entrepreneurial engagement in Sri Lanka. These studies demonstrate consistently that while many young individuals may have an interest in entrepreneurship, structural constraints and risk perceptions often limit actual venture creation.

However, despite these insights, most Sri Lankan research remains largely cross-sectional and intention-driven, focusing on why individuals consider entrepreneurship rather than how they experience the transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship over time (Atapattu & Kulasekara, 2026). As a result, there is limited understanding on the evolving nature of entrepreneurial career transitions in the Sri Lankan context.

Theoretical underpinning of the study

Schlossberg's transition theory is adopted as the theoretical lens used to examine the career shift from paid employment to entrepreneurship. A transition is defined as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 27). In the context of career change, this perspective conceptualises entrepreneurial entry not as a discrete decision, but as a lived process of adjustment in which individuals reinterpret roles, reconstruct identity, and gradually integrate new career meanings (Atapattu & Kulasekara, 2026).

The selection of Schlossberg's framework is grounded in a process-oriented perspective, which distinguishes it from dominant alternative perspectives in career and entrepreneurship research. For example, career construction theory emphasises narrative identity development over time, while social cognitive career theory focuses on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal formation as predictors of career choice (Savickas, 2005). Similarly, entrepreneurial intention models (e.g., theory of planned behavior) conceptualise entrepreneurship primarily as a planned behavioral outcome driven by attitudes and perceived control (Ajzen, 1991). These frameworks largely explain why individuals intend to become entrepreneurs, but offer limited insight into how they experience and adapt during the transition process itself. Schlossberg's transition theory fills this gap by explicitly focusing on lived adaptation across time, making it particularly suitable for understanding entrepreneurship as an evolving career transition rather than a one-time decision event (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 198).

Recent research has applied this framework in diverse contexts, highlighting its relevance for career transitions. For instance, Sachitra and Jaward (2023) examined hybrid entrepreneurship and found that personal strategies and self-related factors were critical in managing the transition, while support and situational variables had lesser impact. Similarly, studies in education and nursing have used the 4 S's to explore transitions from academic programmes to professional practice, or from traditional roles to more complex, internationalised environments (Schumann, 2024). These applications demonstrate that Schlossberg's framework captures not only the decision to change careers but also the holistic adaptation process, including coping mechanisms, resource mobilisation, and personal development, making it particularly suitable for investigating entrepreneurial career transitions.

Schlossberg further underscores that coping with transitions is shaped by three variables, namely, the individual's perception of the transition, the pre- and post-transition environments, and personal characteristics. Career change into entrepreneurship may be considered an anticipated transition, as it is often consciously planned and prepared for. To analyse adaptation more systematically, Schlossberg (1995) proposed the 4 S System (i.e. situation, self, support, and strategies) which captures the resources and barriers shaping transition outcomes.

Situation- Schlossberg (1995) assesses the situation by considering factors like the catalyst for the transition, the individual's perception of the favorability of the timing of the transition, perceived control during the change, expected duration of the transition, extent of role modifications, resemblance between past experiences and the current change, presence of unrelated stressors, and the individual's overall evaluation of the situation's positivity, negativity, or neutrality. These diverse situational factors come into play uniquely for each person during a career change, especially when transitioning to entrepreneurship.

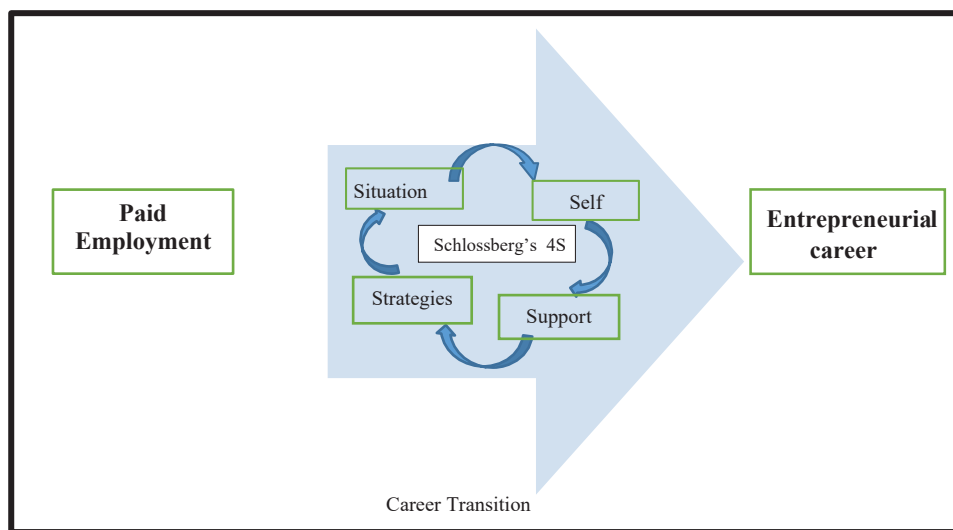
Self- Schlossberg (1995) distinguishes between personal and demographic attributes and psychological resources within the "self" category. Personal and demographic aspects encompass socioeconomic status, age, gender, health, life stage, ethnicity, and culture, all influencing an individual's transitional experience (Merriam, 1998) and sometimes contributing to transitional stress (Lyness, 2003). Psychological resources encompass coping mechanisms like ego development, outlook, resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, commitment, and values (Goodman et al., 2006), all shaping an individual's perspective and resource availability (Merriam, 1998; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Support- Support serves as a pivotal resource in managing stress and transition. Support systems organise and operationalise an individual's resources, including people who assist with tasks, provide essential skills or supplies, and offer coping advice (Schlossberg, 2008). Schlossberg identifies four support categories: family units, close relationships, friend networks, and the institutional or community affiliations of individuals. Support systems empower individuals to leverage psychological resources, navigate transitional changes, and surmount emotional hurdles (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Strategies- Coping strategies align with an individual's psychological resources of self-esteem and mastery (Goodman et al., 2006), resulting in three response types: altering the situation, regulating problem significance, and devising coping methods to deal with stress. Discerning an individual's strategic choices sheds light on their transition management tendencies (Goodman et al., 2006). Entrepreneurship necessitates adept self-regulation and the ability to tackle negative emotions and ongoing stress (Przepiorka, 2016). These strategies encompass active and avoidance coping, with a blend of both yielding optimal stress mitigation outcomes for entrepreneurs (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011; Uy et al., 2013).

Based on the above theorisation, Figure 1 integrates the 4S dimensions with the transition phases (moving in, moving through, moving out). The figure illustrates how situational triggers initiate transition, and how the 4S dimensions facilitate movement toward entrepreneurial stabilization.

Figure 1: The Transition Perspective



Source – Adopted from Schlossberg (1995)

Research Methodology

Participants and Data Collection

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore lived experiences of career transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship (Tran et al., 2019; McMahon & Patton, 2021). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants who had (i) at least two years of prior experience in paid employment, (ii) transitioned into entrepreneurship, and (iii) operated a business generating revenue for a minimum of twelve months. These criteria ensured that participants had sufficient experiential grounding in both employment and entrepreneurial contexts to reflect meaningfully on their transition experiences.

The Western Province of Sri Lanka was selected as the study context due to its relatively diversified labour market structure, lower unemployment rates, and comparatively lower incidence of own-account work relative to other provinces (Labour Force Survey, 2020). This made it a suitable setting for examining structured transitions into entrepreneurship among youth. Participants were identified through purposive sampling, supported by snowball referrals. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, and lasted between 42 and 95 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure consistency. All interviews were conducted in Sinhala, were audio-recorded, translated into English, transcribed, and anonymised using participant codes to ensure confidentiality.

Participant Profile

The study included 10 unmarried participants aged between 18 and 30 years, comprising six males and four females. Participants had established ventures across diverse sectors, including services, manufacturing, agriculture, and digital/technical enterprises. Many leveraged prior work experience and technical competencies in developing their ventures, particularly in service-oriented domains such as consulting, training, and production-related activities. Table 1 provides an overview of their profiles, including gender, start-up details, and interview durations. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the sample size of 10 was considered appropriate for achieving depth of analysis and analytical generalizability rather than statistical representation, which would have been needed for a quantitative study (Yin, 2018). Inclusion criteria ensured that all participants had transitioned fully into active entrepreneurial roles.

Table 1 – Profile of the participants

Participants	Gender	Status	Interview Duration	Start-up Details
R1	Male	Unmarried	80 minutes	Financial technology company
R2	Female	Unmarried	72 minutes	Agriculture business and producing organic seeds
R3	Female	Unmarried	95 minutes	Crafting and painting business
R4	Female	Unmarried	78 minutes	Charcoal exporter
R5	Male	Unmarried	73 minutes	Service centre (Life coaching, career guidance)
R6	Male	Unmarried	52 minutes	Dehydrating agricultural products
R7	Female	Unmarried	42 minutes	Producing varieties of chips and bites
R8	Male	Unmarried	67 minutes	Online optical marketing
R9	Male	Unmarried	76 minutes	Slipper manufacturer (Imports the raw material and manufactures in Sri lanka)
R10	Male	Unmarried	65 minutes	Multiple purpose furniture manufacturer

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed using an inductive thematic approach consistent with Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) and Braun and Clarke (2006), involving iterative movement between data and emerging concepts. Initially, the researcher engaged in repeated reading of transcripts to achieve familiarisation and capture overall narrative patterns. This was followed by line-by-line open coding, generating initial descriptive codes related to motivations, supports, behaviours, perceptions, and outcomes. At the next stage, related codes were clustered into candidate themes and progressively refined through within- and across-case comparisons. While the analysis was primarily inductive, themes were subsequently mapped onto Schlossberg’s 4S framework (Situation, Self, Support, Strategies) to provide a structured interpretive lens.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several measures were implemented. Credibility was addressed through a thorough and systematic approach to data collection and analysis. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences during their career transition, providing rich data. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the study context, participant characteristics, and participant selection criteria, allowing readers to assess the relevance and applicability of the findings to similar contexts. Dependability was established through a transparent and well-documented research process, from data collection to analysis, with a clear trail of decisions made at each stage. Ethical procedures included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation, maintaining confidentiality through anonymisation, and storing all data securely.

Data Analysis and Findings

This section presents the findings in two parts. First, it addresses the first research question by examining the motivations that drive young individuals to transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship. Next, it addresses the second research question by explaining how individuals adapt to this transition through the four dimensions of Schlossberg's framework: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies.

Motivations for Transitioning to Entrepreneurship

The analysis reveals that young individuals' transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship is driven by a combination of push and pull factors, grounded in their lived, paid employment experiences.

Dissatisfaction with Paid Employment (Push Factors)

Participants consistently reported dissatisfaction with their paid employment conditions as a primary trigger for transition. Key issues included inadequate financial rewards, limited autonomy, underutilization of skills, and restricted career growth.

For instance, R2 noted, "*My employment didn't allow me to fulfill my personal targets. I gained less salary despite working hard, leading to dissatisfaction and stress.*" Similarly, R5 explained, "*I couldn't implement my ideas in the workplace and had no freedom to work in my way.*" R7 further added, "*My skills and talents were not fully utilized... I felt stressed and demotivated.*"

Other participants highlighted job insecurity, lack of appreciation, and monotonous routines as contributing factors. These findings indicate that dissatisfaction is not limited to financial concerns but extends to psychological and developmental needs as well.

Desire for Autonomy and Fulfilment (Pull Factors)

Alongside dissatisfaction, participants expressed a strong desire for independence, self-direction, and meaningful work.

R4 reflected: *“In my own business, I feel proud... I can contribute to my country and serve the community.”*

Participants emphasized that identifying a passion-driven career marked a turning point in their transition.

Role of Prior Work Experience as a Catalyst

Prior paid employment played a dual role, not only as a source of dissatisfaction but also as a foundation for entrepreneurial capability.

R1 stated, *“Learning teamwork, strategic goal achievement, and managing limits greatly helped my entrepreneurship.”* R5 similarly noted, *“My strong network from paid employment is invaluable... it forms my entrepreneurship base.”* Participants highlighted that experience provided skills (technical, managerial), networks and confidence to move towards the transition. R6 captured this integration: *“Education and experience make me unique, fostering unconventional thinking.”*

The findings demonstrate that the transition is motivated by an interplay of push factors (dissatisfaction, constraints) and pull factors (autonomy, passion, fulfilment), reinforced by prior work experience. These motivations are embedded in individuals’ lived paid employment realities, and are more concrete than abstract intentions, highlighting the experiential nature of entrepreneurial entry.

Adaptation to Transition: Schlossberg’s 4S Dimensions

While motivations explain why individuals initiate the transition, the findings further reveal how individuals adapt to and sustain this transition through the four dimensions of Schlossberg’s framework: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies.

Participants' Experience of the "Situation" in the Paid Employment-to-Entrepreneurship Transition

The "Situation" dimension reflects how participants navigated the actual transition process, particularly the conditions, constraints, and adjustments encountered after leaving paid employment. Rather than focusing on initial motivations, the findings highlight how individuals experienced and interpreted changing circumstances during the transition phase.

Participants described the transition as a shift from structured and predictable work environments to uncertain and self-directed contexts. This shift required them to recalibrate expectations, routines, and performance standards. Many participants noted that while prior paid employment provided useful foundations, the entrepreneurial context demanded a fundamentally different mode of functioning.

For example, R6 explained, *"When I started, I realized that what I learned is useful, but running everything alone is different. You have to manage everything step by step."* This reflects how situational demands had evolved beyond prior role expectations, requiring continuous adjustment.

A key aspect of the transition experience was the emergence of uncertainty and responsibility. Participants encountered ambiguity in decision-making, income stability, and business outcomes, which contrasted sharply with the predictability of paid employment.

R9 reflected on this shift: *"In a job, you know what you will get at the end of the month. Here, it depends on what you do. That responsibility is always there."* This indicates how situational conditions redefined individuals' perceptions of control and accountability during the transition.

Participants also highlighted the temporal nature of adjustment, where the transition unfolded gradually rather than as an immediate shift. Early stages were often described as experimental and unstable, requiring individuals to test ideas, refine approaches, and adapt to evolving conditions.

R3 noted, *"At the beginning, it was not clear how things would work. I had to try different ways and see what fits."* This illustrates how the transition situation was experienced as fluid and iterative rather than fixed.

In addition, the transition involved simultaneous role negotiation, where participants moved from being employees with defined responsibilities to entrepreneurs managing multiple roles. This included overseeing operations, finances, customer relations, and decision-making processes. R10 explained, *“You are responsible for everything. There is no separate department, you have to handle all sides of the business.”* Such experiences highlight how situational complexity increased during the transition, requiring individuals to adapt to expanded role demands.

The findings demonstrate that the “Situation” dimension is not limited to initial triggers but extends to how individuals experience and manage changing conditions during the transition process. The shift is characterised by increased uncertainty, expanded responsibility, and evolving role expectations. In line with Schlossberg’s framework, these situational factors shape how individuals interpret their transition context and influence their ongoing adaptation to entrepreneurial life.

Participants’ Experiences of the “Self” in the Paid Employment-to-Entrepreneurship Transition

The “Self” dimension captures how individuals’ internal resources shape their capacity to navigate and adapt to the transition process. Rather than focusing on static personality traits, the findings highlight how participants’ self-perceptions, beliefs, and psychological orientations evolved as they encountered the uncertainties and demands of entrepreneurial life.

Participants described the transition as requiring a reconfiguration of self-belief, particularly in relation to managing ambiguity and sustaining confidence without external validation. Unlike structured, paid employment settings, entrepreneurship demanded a stronger reliance on internal judgment and self-direction. As R1 explained, *“I enjoy accepting challenges and strategically overcoming them,”* reflecting a proactive orientation toward uncertainty. Similarly, R2 noted, *“Risk-taking is one of my abilities. We must be ready to take the risk to achieve our targets,”* indicating how confidence in handling risk became central to adaptation.

A prominent feature of the transition process was the development of resilience and persistence in the face of setbacks. Participants emphasized that challenges were not exceptional events but ongoing aspects of entrepreneurial life, requiring sustained psychological endurance. R2 expressed this clearly: *“Commitment is my strength. I never give up easily.”* This highlights how perseverance functioned not merely

as a trait but as an active resource, enabling individuals to remain engaged despite uncertainty and slow progress.

Participants also demonstrated strong learning-oriented mindsets, which shaped how they responded to unfamiliar situations. Rather than perceiving limitations as barriers, they approached them as opportunities for growth and self-improvement. R7 noted, *“I try to learn from both positive and negative situations,”* while R6 emphasized, *“There is a solution for every problem,”* illustrating an adaptive cognitive mindset that supported continuous adjustment. This orientation allowed participants to reinterpret challenges as part of the developmental process rather than as barriers.

Another important aspect of the “Self” dimension was the emergence of self-regulation and personal discipline. Participants described the need to manage their own motivation, emotions, and focus in the absence of external organisational structures. R3 explained, *“I don’t compare myself with others; I focus on my own progress,”* highlighting a self-directed approach to maintaining motivation. Similarly, R4 emphasized the role of positive thinking and internal drive in sustaining effort over time.

The findings indicate that the “Self” dimension plays a major role in shaping how individuals interpret, respond to, and persist through the transition process. Adaptation is supported by a combination of confidence, resilience, learning orientation, and self-regulation, which together enable individuals to navigate uncertainty and sustain their entrepreneurial engagement. In line with Schlossberg’s framework, these internal resources influence not only how individuals experience transition demands but also how effectively they adjust to their new roles over time.

Participants’ Experiences of “Support” in the Paid Employment-to-Entrepreneurship Transition

Support emerged as a relational resource shaping participants’ ability to navigate the transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship. Rather than functioning as a static resource, support operated dynamically across the transition process by reinforcing confidence, reducing uncertainty, and enabling access to knowledge and opportunities.

Family support was particularly salient, not only as emotional encouragement but also as a source of guidance and legitimacy during the transition. Several participants

highlighted the influential role of fathers as mentors, indicating the culturally embedded nature of entrepreneurial support systems. As R2 noted, *“My mentor is my father. He guides me,”* while R8 similarly reflected, *“Father always inspired me. He was my role model.”* This form of support extended beyond motivation to include direction, reassurance, and decision-making guidance during uncertain phases of the transition.

Peer and network-based support further enabled participants to adapt to the demands of entrepreneurship. Rather than relying solely on close personal ties, the participants actively cultivated professional relationships to access experiential knowledge and practical insights. R5 pointed to this by stating, *“Network is net worth,”* highlighting the instrumental value of connections. Similarly, R1 explained, *“I have many connections with business people. They share their experiences quite frankly with me,”* while R6 noted, *“Relationships with other entrepreneurs were very helpful... we can share challenges and ways of overcoming them.”* These interactions functioned as learning platforms, allowing participants to benchmark their progress and refine their approaches.

Importantly, support was not uniformly available or passively received; participants demonstrated agency in mobilizing and leveraging support systems relevant to their needs. The combination of familial encouragement, peer validation, and professional networking created a supportive ecosystem that facilitated both psychological adjustment and practical problem-solving during the transition.

Taken together, the “Support” dimension highlights that entrepreneurial transition is not an isolated individual endeavor but a socially embedded process. In line with Schlossberg’s framework, the presence, accessibility, and strategic utilization of support systems significantly shaped participants’ capacity to sustain and adapt to their new entrepreneurial roles.

Participants’ Experiences of “Strategies” in the Paid Employment-to-Entrepreneurship Transition

The “Strategies” dimension reflects the deliberate actions and coping mechanisms participants employed to manage the practical and psychological demands of transitioning into entrepreneurship. The findings indicate that adaptation was not passive; rather, participants actively developed and adjusted strategies to navigate uncertainty, stabilize their ventures, and sustain their engagement during the transition process.

One of the key strategies observed was managing social skepticism through selective engagement. Participants encountered doubt from peers and professional circles, particularly during the early stages of transition. Instead of disengaging entirely, they exercised control over whose opinions influenced their decisions. As R4 noted, *“Many people thought I had made the wrong decision... but I decided to focus only on those who supported me.”* Similarly, R1 explained, *“Except for my family, others didn’t believe in the idea. So I stopped discussing my plans with them and concentrated on building them.”* This reflects a boundary-setting approach, where participants filtered discouraging inputs while reinforcing supportive relationships, thereby maintaining emotional stability.

A second prominent strategy involved managing financial uncertainty through cautious and staged approaches. Participants did not immediately commit extensive resources into their start-ups; instead, they adopted incremental investment and cost-control practices. R2 described, *“Since I didn’t have initial capital, I arranged for financial support from my family and started small,”* while R5 reminisced, *“It was difficult without a regular job, so I minimized personal spending and reinvested carefully.”* These actions demonstrate a pragmatic orientation toward risk, where participants actively managed financial exposure rather than avoiding entrepreneurial engagement altogether.

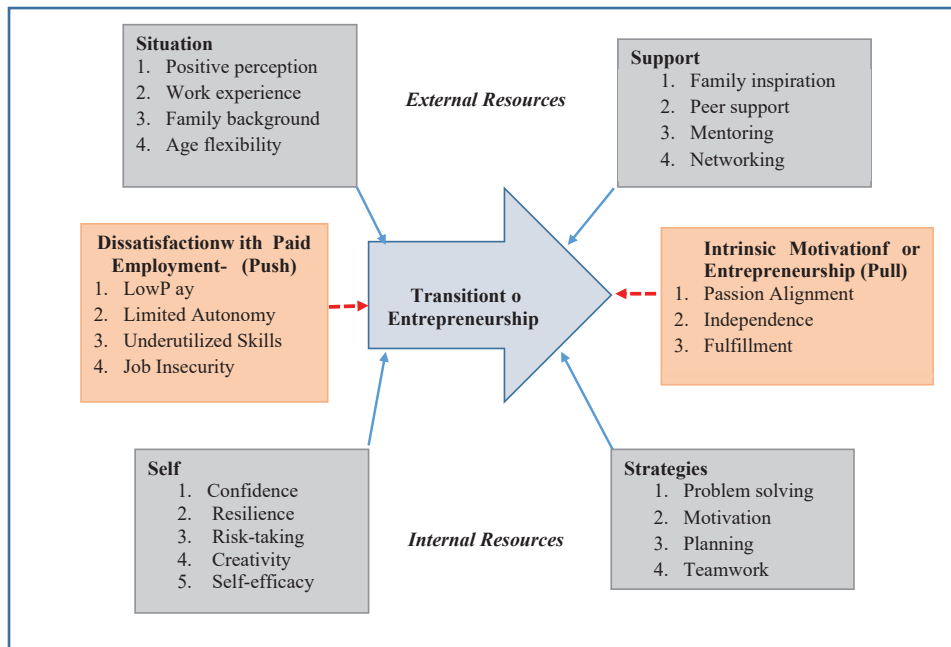
Participants also employed learning-oriented strategies to address capability gaps, particularly in areas where prior experience was limited. Rather than perceiving these gaps as constraints, they engaged in continuous learning through experimentation and observation. R6 stated, *“Designing the business model was challenging, so I researched, observed competitors, and adjusted step by step,”* and R10 reflected, *“I had to improve my IT knowledge. I learned gradually because digital skills were necessary.”* This reflects a process of learning-by-doing, where adaptation occurs through iterative refinement rather than via pre-existing expertise.

Another important strategy was market adaptation through direct engagement and feedback. Participants adjusted their offerings based on customer responses and evolving market conditions. R3 explained, *“Understanding customers was difficult at first, so I started interacting directly and modifying my services based on feedback,”* while R8 highlighted the need to shape demand, noting, *“I had to educate customers and promote awareness.”* These actions illustrate how participants actively aligned their ventures with market realities rather than merely relying on fixed initial plans.

In addition, participants demonstrated adaptive restructuring of personal work practices to meet the demands of entrepreneurship. This included improving time management, prioritizing tasks, and delegating responsibilities where necessary. For instance, R4 described adjusting daily routines to enhance productivity, while R9 reported focusing on essential activities and delegating tasks to manage the workload more effectively. These adjustments indicate that adaptation extended beyond business strategies to include changes in personal work habits.

The findings demonstrate that the “Strategies” dimension plays a central role in sustaining the transition process. Here, adaptation is achieved through intentional, context-responsive actions, including managing social influences, mitigating financial risks, developing capabilities, responding to market demands, and restructuring personal work practices. In line with Schlossberg’s framework, these strategies shape how individuals cope with the transition demands and sustainability of their entrepreneurial engagement over time.

Figure 2 presents the thematic map that summarizes the findings of the study. It provides a visual representation of and a guide to how the themes emerging from the findings are mapped onto Schlossberg’s 4S framework. The figure illustrates the interconnected nature of the four key dimensions of the theory (e.g. Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies) and how they collectively explain the career transition process from paid employment to entrepreneurship.

Figure 2: The Thematic Map

Discussion

The findings from this research shed light on the factors that contribute to successful transitions from paid employment to entrepreneurial careers. The study explored the participants' experiences and perspectives on their career transitions and identified key elements that played significant roles in their successful entrepreneurial journeys. This section analyses and interprets these findings, providing insights into their implications for career transition theory and practice.

In relation to the first research question, the findings demonstrate that the transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship is not driven by isolated intentions, but by an interplay of push and pull factors embedded in lived work experiences. Dissatisfaction with paid employment conditions (e.g., limited autonomy, lack of recognition) combined with aspirations for independence and meaningful work acted as key triggers. This extends intention-based models of entrepreneurship by showing that motivations are not purely cognitive or planned, but emerge from accumulated experiential dissonance within paid employment contexts. These motivations fueled the commitment and dedication of these young entrepreneurs, essential for weathering the difficulties encountered during the transition (Vallerand et al., 2003). Similar findings were also reported by Akay and Yilmaz (2025), who conceptualise career

transition to entrepreneurship as a process of individuation, passing through phases (pre-startup, startup, up and running) moderated by parental relations. Importantly, this finding contributes to the literature by reframing entrepreneurial entry as a transition process rather than a discrete decision point, thereby complementing and extending intention-based frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, which tend to underemphasize lived experience and adjustment dynamics.

In relation to the second research question, these findings align closely with the “Support” dimension of Schlossberg’s 4S framework, while also revealing a context-specific extension: the particularly strong role of fathers as entrepreneurial mentors. This highlights how support systems in collectivist contexts such as Sri Lanka may be more familial and hierarchical than those typically emphasized in Western literature, thereby extending the framework’s contextual applicability. The finding suggests that early career transitions may play a formative role in entrepreneurial identity construction. Rather than transitioning into a pre-defined identity, young individuals appear to construct and stabilize their entrepreneurial identity through the transition process itself, particularly during the “moving through” phase of Schlossberg’s model. This provides a process-based extension to identity-oriented perspectives in the entrepreneurship literature.

The study also identified significant challenges that participants encountered during their journeys. One major hurdle was the lack of resources available for entrepreneurship. Financial constraints often hindered participants' ability to invest in their businesses or secure essential equipment (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986). Therefore, they had to rely on personal savings, family support, or loans to bridge the financial gap. Access to capital and resources emerged as a pressing concern, especially in the early stages of entrepreneurship.

Participants also faced internal and external challenges. Internal challenges, such as time management, emotional decision-making, and trust issues, required self-awareness and continuous improvement. External challenges included skepticism from peers and society, making it challenging for entrepreneurs to stay motivated and confident when making their decisions. Customer acquisition and satisfaction were additional challenges reported by some participants. Building a customer base and fulfilling dynamic customer requirements demand adaptability and effective marketing strategies (Payne & Frow, 2005). Entrepreneurs had to stay attuned to market trends and consumer preferences to succeed in their ventures.

These challenges further reinforce the importance of the “Strategies” dimension of the 4S framework, as participants did not passively experience constraints but actively developed coping mechanisms such as selective social engagement, financial risk management, and learning-by-doing. This highlights that successful transition is not solely dependent on resources (Situation or Support), but on how individuals respond strategically to constraints, thereby emphasising the dynamic interaction between the four dimensions.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the four elements of Schlossberg’s framework operate in an interconnected manner across different stages of the transition process. Motivations rooted in dissatisfaction (Situation) initiate the transition; personal resources such as resilience and self-efficacy (Self) enable individuals to confront uncertainty; relational resources (Support) provide emotional and instrumental backing; and adaptive coping mechanisms (Strategies) sustain the transition over time. This interactional perspective extends the framework by demonstrating how the 4S elements dynamically reinforce one another across the pre-transition, early transition, and stabilization phases.

However, simultaneously, alternative explanations should also be considered. Macroeconomic uncertainty, limited paid employment opportunities, and cultural expectations surrounding family roles in Sri Lanka may have shaped both the motivations for transition and the prominence of family-based support (Atapattu & Kulasekara, 2026). In particular, strong family involvement may reflect broader collectivist norms rather than purely individual-level preferences, suggesting important boundary conditions for generalizing these findings to other contexts.

Implications

Theoretically, this study adds to the body of knowledge by incorporating Schlossberg’s transition theory to understand and analyse career transitions from paid employment to entrepreneurial careers. More importantly, the study extends Schlossberg’s 4S framework by demonstrating that adaptation to entrepreneurial careers is not determined solely by the presence of resources (Situation, Self, Support), but by how these resources are actively mobilized through strategies. Specifically, the findings reveal that strategic coping mechanisms such as selective social engagement, staged financial risk-taking, and incremental capability development shape the association between individual resources and successful transition outcomes. This

refines the 4S framework by positioning “Strategies” as a dynamic integrative mechanism rather than a residual category.

In addition, the study contributes to the career transition and entrepreneurship literature by reframing entrepreneurial entry as a processual and experiential phenomenon rather than a discrete, intention-driven decision (Gartner et al., 1994). In doing so, it complements and extends intention-based and identity-based models by demonstrating how entrepreneurial identity and adaptation are constructed through the “moving through” phase of transition. This theory, with its focus on the interplay between situation, self, support, and strategies during transitions, provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities individuals face during this critical phase of their careers. It was revealed in this study that participants' positive perceptions of their career transitions highlight the importance of considering individual mindsets during such shifts. Thus, the study not only applies but also contextually extends Schlossberg's framework within entrepreneurial settings, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Empirically, the study contributes context-specific insights by focusing on unmarried youth entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka's Western Province—a demographic and geographical context that remains underrepresented in entrepreneurship and career transition research. This sample highlights how early-career transitions unfold in environments characterized by economic uncertainty and strong collectivist cultural norms. A notable empirical contribution is the identification of family, particularly fathers, as central entrepreneurial mentors, which contrasts with the more individualistic or institutional support systems emphasized in Western literature. This finding underscores the culturally embedded nature of support systems in the region and enriches empirical understanding of the “Support” dimension within the 4S framework.

From a practical standpoint, this study provides actionable insights for individuals contemplating entrepreneurial careers and those involved in supporting career transitions. For career counselors and educators, the findings underline the importance of developing entrepreneurial self-efficacy, resilience, and adaptive mindsets among youth. Interventions should move beyond career choice guidance to include training on coping with uncertainty, managing risk, and sustaining motivation during transition phases. For higher educational institutions and business incubators, the results highlight the need to design experiential learning environments, mentoring

programs, and peer-network platforms that strengthen the “Support” and “Strategies” dimensions. Structured exposure to real-world entrepreneurial challenges can facilitate learning-by-doing and capability development.

For policymakers, the findings suggest the importance of integrated transition-support mechanisms aligned with the 4S framework. These may include early-stage funding schemes, mentorship platforms, and entrepreneurship training initiatives that not only provide resources but also build adaptive capacity among young entrepreneurs. Moreover, policymakers can utilize the research to develop targeted initiatives, such as startup funding and entrepreneurship training programs that address the identified 4S factors and thus facilitate smoother career transitions.

Conclusion

This study set out to address two research questions: (1) what motivates young individuals to initiate the transition from paid employment to entrepreneurship, and (2) how the elements of Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies shape their adaptation during this transition. Guided by Schlossberg’s transition theory, the findings were organized around the 4S framework to provide a process-oriented understanding of entrepreneurial career transitions. First, the analysis revealed that motivations for transition were strongly shaped by situational conditions, particularly dissatisfaction with paid employment, including lack of autonomy, underutilization of skills, job insecurity, and limited growth opportunities. At the same time, the pull of aligning passion, independence, and self-fulfillment catalyzed entrepreneurial entry. This demonstrates that entrepreneurial motivation is not solely intention-driven but emerges from negative paid employment experiences, highlighting the experiential nature of transition triggers.

Second, the study highlighted the role of Self as a key resource in sustaining transitions. Individual attributes such as confidence, resilience, risk-taking, creativity, self-efficacy, and self-belief emerged as central enablers, suggesting that adaptation to entrepreneurship is supported by various psychological resources that evolve during the transition, rather than by static personality traits alone. Third, Support emerged as an important stabilizing force in participants’ entrepreneurial journeys, operating through emotional encouragement, mentorship, and professional networking. Family members, particularly fathers, as mentors and role models, alongside peers and fellow entrepreneurs, provided guidance, legitimacy, and reassurance during uncertain

stages of the entrepreneurial journey. This highlights the socially embedded nature of entrepreneurial transitions in the Sri Lankan context, where familial and relational support systems play a more prominent role than typically reflected in the existing literature.

Finally, participants sustained their transitions through deliberate coping strategies such as managing social skepticism, mitigating financial risk, pursuing continuous learning, and adapting to market demands. This finding underscores that successful entrepreneurial transition depends not only on available resources, but also on how individuals actively mobilize and integrate these resources through strategic action. As the overall conclusion, the 4S framework illustrates that entrepreneurial transition is neither linear nor uniform, but a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of situation, self, support, and strategies across different stages of transition. Importantly, the study extends Schlossberg's framework by demonstrating that "Strategies" function as a mediating mechanism that connects resources to adaptive outcomes, thereby offering a more processual and integrative understanding of career transitions into entrepreneurship.

This study is limited by its relatively small sample of ten participants, where the sample was restricted to unmarried youth aged 18–30 in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. This may have narrowed the scope of the research, especially in overlooking other demographic and regional contexts. Future research could expand this investigation along several avenues. First, longitudinal studies could examine how entrepreneurial transitions evolve over time, particularly across the "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out" phases, to capture the dynamic nature of adaptation. Second, comparative studies across different cultural or regional contexts would help assess the transferability of the findings, particularly the prominence of family-based support systems observed in the Sri Lankan setting. Finally, further research may integrate macro-level factors such as labour market conditions, policy frameworks, and national entrepreneurship initiatives in order to better understand how structural conditions interact with individual-level transition processes.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper, whether financial or of any other nature.

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