

SUCCESSFUL CAREER DEVELOPMENT: FATEFUL VERSUS STRATEGIC DECISIONS

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Abstract: Background: Career development is often assumed to be the outcome of rational, long-term strategic planning. However, individual experiences frequently reveal the decisive role of seemingly spontaneous choices made in unpredictable situations. These "fateful decisions" challenge the dominant understanding that success follows exclusively from planned actions. The literature highlights the complexity of decision-making, yet offers limited insights into how individuals interpret and implement different types of career-related decisions over time.

Purpose: This paper aims to explore whether individuals perceive their career development as primarily shaped by strategic or fateful decisions. It also investigates how these decisions relate to key managerial functions in professional contexts.

Study design/methodology/approach: A structured survey was conducted with 113 participants from various professions and organizations in the Republic of North Macedonia. Respondents were asked to reflect on the types of decisions that most influenced their careers and how these decisions correspond with elements of managerial practice such as planning and organizing.

Findings/conclusions: The results indicate that fateful decisions—those made in response to unforeseen opportunities or turning points—are more commonly recognized as shaping career paths than strategic planning. A significant portion of participants also described alternating decision-making, influenced by a variety of external factors. Regardless of the decision type, most respondents associated their career implementation with planning and organizing functions, rather than with leadership or control activities.

Limitations/future research: The study is limited to self-reported perceptions within a specific national context and sample size. Future research could benefit from comparative studies across cultures and professions, as well as from longitudinal approaches that track career decision-making over time.

The aim of this paper is to explore which type of decision—strategic or fateful—is perceived as more influential in shaping individual career development. In addition, the study examines how such decisions are identified and interpreted within the context of management.

Keywords: career development, fateful decisions, strategic decisions, decision-making, personal growth

1. INTRODUCTION

An individual is a social and psychological being shaped by lifelong experiences within a broader social environment. Human development unfolds through dynamic interactions with others and is strongly influenced by institutional, relational, and cultural systems that structure everyday life.

Individual development is a process through which people come to understand themselves, strengthen their competencies, and move toward maturity, achievement, and self-realization. This process is closely tied to the decisions individuals make and how these decisions are implemented through education, work, and life experience.

The prevailing view suggests that career development results from long-term strategic decisions made at key stages in life. However, numerous real-life cases show that individuals often attribute their career paths to decisions made spontaneously or in response to specific life circumstances—choices that, in hindsight, prove to be decisive or even fateful in shaping their professional direction.

2. INDIVIDUAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The development of the individual is a dynamic and lifelong process shaped by social, psychological, and environmental factors. People acquire personal qualities through interactions with others, and these social relationships become essential mechanisms in shaping identity and behavior. Contemporary theoretical perspectives emphasize that individual development is not determined solely by inherent traits but is also influenced by broader social structures such as family, education, religion, the economy, and political systems (Krstevska & Solunchevski, 2026, p. 26)

Personal growth is continuous and evolves as individuals reflect on and refine their competencies, knowledge, values, and life goals. This developmental process encourages maturity, success, self-fulfillment, and resilience. Nevertheless, many individuals encounter difficulties in coping with life's challenges due to a lack of essential personal and career-related skills. In response, contemporary management thinking advocates principles that support both personal satisfaction and professional engagement in the workplace.

Two key principles illustrate this shift. The first is the principle of full commitment to work, which promotes the idea that the quality and intensity of engagement in a task is more valuable than the amount of time spent on it. In other words, shorter, more focused efforts are often more meaningful than extended periods of low-effort activity. The second is the principle of flexibility, which emphasizes adaptability to individual differences, diverse behavioral responses, and varied approaches to task execution. (Krstevska & Solunchevski, 2024, S. 52)

From an organizational perspective, individual career development is a critical aspect of human resource strategy. It is commonly understood through the following elements: *Competence and knowledge: Values and life goals: Personal and interpersonal style: Awareness of opportunities.* Solunchevski & Vchkov, 2019, p. 203)

Ultimately, individual career development is heavily shaped by decision-making processes and the implementation of those decisions across the span of one's working life. The types of decisions made, whether planned and strategic or unplanned and circumstantial, play a vital role in defining career direction and success.

3. TYPES OF DECISIONS AND DECISION-MAKING RELATED TO INDIVIDUAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Individuals make various types of decisions throughout their lives. Depending on the perspective from which they are viewed, decisions can be categorized according to different criteria:

- According to their purpose, decisions may be educational, work-related, family, investment, financial, etc.
- According to their significance, decisions may be strategic, operational, executive, etc.
- According to the methods used, they may be programmed and non-programmed decisions.
- According to the way of responding to environmental changes, decisions may be routine, strategic, and fateful.
- According to the time of implementation, decisions may be short-term, medium-term, and long-term, etc.

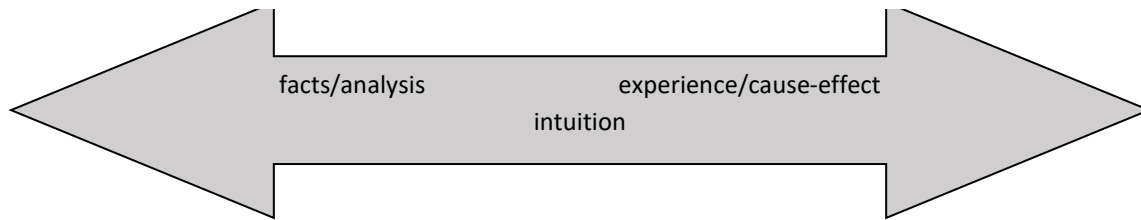
Depending on the type of decision, there are also various approaches to decision-making. Among the most commonly used are:

- *Fact-based decision-making*, which involves making decisions by management or employees after gathering all relevant facts.
- *Experience-based decision-making*. Acquired knowledge, lived experiences, formed judgments, and established opinions significantly assist in making effective and efficient decisions in similar situations.
- *Intuition-based decision-making*, which is grounded in immediate observation, instinctive knowledge, and the ability to respond promptly without thorough reasoning, while taking into account key dominant facts and existing experience.
- *Cause-and-effect-based decision-making*, which assumes the establishment of rational foundations for all essential elements of the decision-making process.
- *Decision-making based on systems analysis*, which is a form of quantitative decision-making whose objectivity is expected to provide greater authority and distinct effectiveness of the decisions made (Solunchevski & Vchkov, 2026, S. 197)

The decisions an individual makes usually go through a mental decision-making process. This process includes six consecutive steps: Defining and analyzing the problem: Formulating alternative solutions: Evaluating the alternative solutions: Choosing the solution – the decision: Implementing the decision: Control and evaluation. (Schermerhorn, 2013, S. 171).

Strictly speaking, the decision-making process consists of the first four steps. However, since a decision without implementation has no real value, in a broader context, the full decision-making process comprises all six steps. In each of these steps, the individual or organization undertakes a series of specific actions. (Griffin, 2010, S. 90)

Figure 1: Relationship between types of decision-making and decision-making conditions



Source: Solunchevski, M. & Vckov, L. 2026, p. 188.

Depending on the type of decision, the process takes place under conditions of certainty, risk, or uncertainty (**Figure 1**).

- Decisions under conditions of certainty occur when decision-makers have sufficient information to anticipate the different options among the clearly defined alternatives. In such cases, we can accurately predict what will happen in the future.
- Where insufficient information is available, decisions are made under conditions of risk. Risk refers to the probability of achieving desired results under the influence of known or assumed conditions. In such cases, we know the likelihood of each possible outcome, but we cannot predict the exact outcome.
- Decision-making under uncertainty occurs when a large number of factors need to be considered, but these cannot be standardized or are continuously changing. Under such conditions, we do not know the probabilities or the possible outcomes.

Despite the many types of decisions and decision-making approaches encountered throughout life and work, it appears that long-term individual development is most often shaped by strategic or fateful decisions.

4. INDIVIDUAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT AS A RESULT OF STRATEGIC OR FATEFUL DECISIONS

It is commonly assumed that successful career development is the result of strategic decisions, plans, and their implementation. However, the experiences of many individuals suggest that their careers were not always shaped by strategic choices. On the contrary, career development often relies on fateful decisions, plans, and their realization. Strategic planning and strategic decisions form a kind of circular dynamic. One may ask: are strategic decisions made first and then strategic plans developed accordingly, or do strategic plans come first and are followed by decisions? It seems that strategic decisions precede and follow the plan, essentially placing the plan "in a sandwich" that is, the individual envisions an idea, transforms it into a strategic goal, and then decides to develop a strategic plan. Once the plan is in place, it is implemented through a strategic decision. This constitutes the strategic management process.

At first glance, all individuals who progress and rise toward success appear to be following the classical pattern of strategic decision-making and planning. But when examining numerous cases of individuals who radically changed their direction or professional domain, one must ask: were their decisions truly strategic? Had they long been carrying those ideas, desires, problems, or challenges within themselves, gradually analyzing and maturing them?

Several possible patterns emerge:

If individuals have faced challenges over an extended period and analyzed their options carefully, developing and evaluating alternatives, the decision they ultimately made could be classified as a strategic one — and its successful implementation confirms this.

If they faced challenges for a long time and developed two or more nearly identical alternatives with similar chances of success, it may be concluded that each decision evolved into a strategic plan and its successful implementation.

If individuals developed without a clear goal, mostly influenced by external factors (such as family, relatives, colleagues, friends), and without a defined focus, their development may be characterized as unplanned or spontaneous — involving a mix of both strategic and fateful decisions implemented through persistent effort over time.

If a strategic decision was made, but its implementation proved problematic or impossible, and the individual responded by modifying the course through another decision (a sort of bypass), then the original strategic decision loses its classification and becomes more recognizable as a momentary or situational choice - which later evolves into a fateful decision.

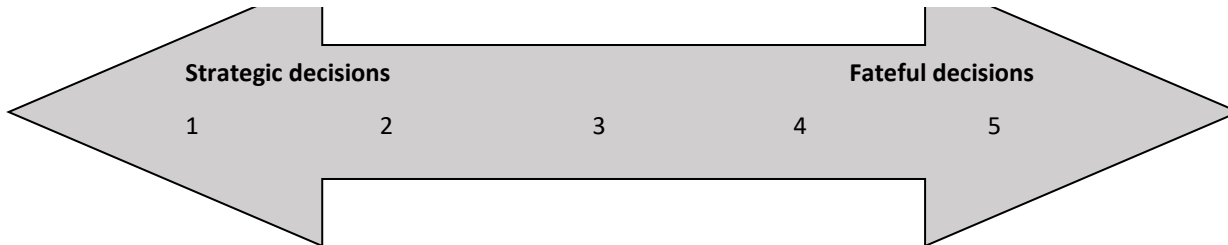
If, during their development (through education, work, or life experience), individuals recognized an unexpected opportunity they had never previously considered, and turned it into a decision followed by planning and

implementation - and even though the early results were not long-term, continuous effort eventually led to long-term success - the resulting success story could be described as the outcome of a fateful decision with strategic implementation.

On this continuum, from strategic to fateful decisions, which type tends to prevail in successful individuals?

To further define this continuum, the next section presents a brief analysis of the most significant characteristics of strategic and fateful decisions.

Figure 2: Continuum of Strategic and Fateful Decisions



Source: The authors' own research

5. COMMON CHARACTERISTICS AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STRATEGIC AND FATEFUL DECISIONS

Strategic decisions are non-programmed and long-term. They are based on an analysis of both internal and external environments, using both reason and intuition. These decisions define a long-term, upward developmental path. They are generally more difficult to implement and require the individual to invest both positive and negative energy. Strategic decisions do not contain elements of indecision. Their implementation is often less emotional and less prone to oscillation. Strategic decisions are typical across all fields, disciplines, and areas of interest. In making and implementing them, individuals typically engage in core managerial functions.

Some strategic decisions may be programmed over the long term - for instance, when children continue the professions of their parents or take over family businesses. In such cases, professional development is rooted in long-term strategic decisions, and the management of inherited businesses is carried out based on these decisions, with implementation often supported by experience. Again, managerial functions are applied during both the decision-making and implementation phases.

Fateful decisions, by contrast, are also non-programmed but initially unclear in terms of whether they are short-term or long-term. Like strategic ones, they are made based on analysis of internal and external circumstances, but they rely more on intuition and emotion - decisions made “from the heart.” Fateful decisions often create a turning point in the individual’s developmental path. They are easier to implement, though they too require an investment of both positive and negative energy. Unlike strategic decisions, they allow for a degree of indecision. When they are positive, their implementation is accompanied by greater passion and is more emotionally charged and oscillatory.

In such cases, professional development is based on a series of decisions that originate from an initial fateful decision. These individuals typically pursue new, rather than inherited, business paths, and their management practices involve both programmed and non-programmed decisions, often relying on trial-and-error learning, high energy, and emotional commitment. Like strategic ones, fateful decisions are present across all disciplines, domains, and professions. Individuals also apply core managerial functions in making and implementing these decisions.

Gender, age, level of education, and job position show no clearly identifiable correlation with the prevalence of either strategic or fateful decisions.

6. RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Sample Overview

The study included a sample of 113 respondents from various professions and organizations across the Republic of North Macedonia (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Of the total, 68 participants (60.2%) were male and 45 (39.8%) were female. Regarding age, 20 respondents (17.7%) were under the age of 35, 42 (37.2%) were up to 50 years old, and 51 (45.1%) were up to 65 years old.

According to their level of education, 21 participants (18.6%) had completed secondary education, 55 (48.7%) held a university degree, and 37 (32.7%) held a master’s or doctoral degree.

As for their professional positions within their organizations, 20 respondents (17.7%) identified as managers (M), 72

(63.7%) as specialists (S), and 21 (18.6%) as holding other types of roles (O).

Participants were asked to select the type of decision that most influenced their career development. The response categories were as follows:

- A single strategic decision that has always lived within me.
- A strategic decision made between two or more dilemmas.
- Alternating decisions throughout life based on various influencing factors.
- A decision recognized as an opportunity at a key moment in my life.
- A decision made after experiencing failure or dissatisfaction in my previous career path.

Research Results

When analyzing the responses by gender, it was found that among male participants, the most dominant category was: “A decision recognized as an opportunity at a key moment in my life.” Among female participants, the most frequently selected category was: “Alternating decisions throughout life based on various influencing factors.”

The third most common category for both genders was: “A single strategic decision that has always lived within me.”

The categories least selected by both male and female respondents were: “A decision made after failure or dissatisfaction in my previous career path,” and “A strategic decision made between two or more dilemmas.”

Table 1: Overview of strategic versus fateful decisions by gender, age, education, and job position

| Type of decision Sample | Gender | | Age | | | Education | | | Position | | | | Total |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| | m | w | 35 | 50 | 65 | SE | HE | MSc PhD | M | S | O | N | % |
| A single strategic decision that has always lived within me. | 11 | 11 | 4 | 10 | 8 | 1 | 13 | 8 | 4 | 14 | 4 | 22 | 5,1 |
| A strategic decision that I made between two or more dilemmas. | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 0,1 |
| Alternating decisions throughout life according to the influence of various factors. | 22 | 17 | 7 | 13 | 19 | 8 | 17 | 14 | 8 | 22 | 9 | 39 | 34,5 |
| A decision that I recognized at a crucial moment in my life as an opportunity. | 26 | 11 | 8 | 14 | 15 | 7 | 19 | 11 | 7 | 24 | 6 | 37 | 32,7 |
| A decision after failure or dissatisfaction in my previous career develop | 7 | 5 | 1 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 9 | 2 | 12 | 10,6 |
| Total | 68 | 45 | 20 | 42 | 51 | 21 | 55 | 37 | 20 | 72 | 21 | 113 | 100,0 |

Source: The authors' own research in organizations on the territory of the RNM carried out in 2025

When analyzed by age group, the most common category among younger respondents (under 35) and middle-aged respondents (up to 50) was again:

“A decision recognized as an opportunity at a key moment in my life.”

In contrast, among older respondents (up to 65), the dominant category was: “Alternating decisions throughout life based on various influencing factors.”

For all age groups,

“A single strategic decision that has always lived within me” was the third most frequently selected category.

The categories related to failure or strategic dilemma were again represented in minimal percentages.

Regarding educational background, respondents with secondary and postgraduate education most often selected: “Alternating decisions throughout life based on various influencing factors.”

Respondents with a university degree most frequently selected: “A decision recognized as an opportunity at a key moment in my life.”

For all education levels, “A single strategic decision that has always lived within me” was consistently the third most selected category.

The remaining two categories remained minimally represented.

Analyzing the data by job position, across all three groups (managers, professionals, and others) the most frequently reported category was: “Alternating decisions throughout life based on various influencing factors.” This was followed by: “A decision recognized as an opportunity at a key moment in my life,” and third: “A single strategic decision that has always lived within me.”

The categories “A decision made after failure or dissatisfaction” and “A strategic decision made between two or more dilemmas” were again selected by the fewest respondents.

6. DISCUSSION

The results of this study offer important insights into how individuals perceive and interpret the decisions that shape their career development. Contrary to the traditional assumption that successful careers are primarily the outcome of long-term strategic planning, the findings reveal a more nuanced reality.

A significant proportion of participants attributed their career progression to decisions that were made spontaneously or in response to unforeseen opportunities - described here as fateful decisions. This supports the idea that career development is often emergent rather than strictly planned. These decisions are frequently influenced by intuition, emotional readiness, and contextual opportunity rather than formalized analysis or long-term foresight.

Interestingly, strategic decisions (those based on vision, analysis, and deliberate planning) were identified by fewer respondents as the dominant influence on their career paths. Still, their role remains important, particularly in cases where individuals had long nurtured a goal or clearly defined professional ambition.

A third category “alternating decisions” reflects a hybrid trajectory shaped by multiple factors over time. This group illustrates that career paths are often dynamic and iterative, shaped by a series of adjustments rather than a single defining choice.

Regardless of the type of decision, respondents most commonly linked implementation to the managerial functions of organizing and planning. This suggests that even spontaneous or intuitive decisions, once made, are frequently supported by structured action. The lower emphasis on leading and controlling may indicate that individuals tend to associate career-building more with preparation and coordination than with direct influence or monitoring.

Finally, the lack of strong correlation between decision type and variables such as gender, age, education, or job position reinforces the universality of these patterns. Fateful and strategic decisions appear to cut across demographic boundaries, suggesting that the underlying mechanisms of career development are broadly shared.

7. CONCLUSION

Individual development, including career advancement, depends strongly on the quality and type of decisions a person makes over time. This study explored the influence of strategic and fateful decisions on career development, examining how such decisions are perceived and implemented, and which managerial functions are most often associated with their execution.

The findings revealed that fateful decisions (those made intuitively or in response to unexpected opportunities) were more commonly recognized as defining moments in career development than traditional strategic decisions. A substantial portion of respondents also described their careers as shaped by alternating decisions driven by changing circumstances over time.

Despite the differences in decision type, most respondents connected their implementation to the managerial functions of organizing and planning, regardless of whether the decision was made with long-term intent or under spontaneous conditions. This suggests that structured follow-up remains essential, even when the initial decision is made in a non-linear or emergent way.

No significant correlations were found between decision type and demographic variables such as gender, age, education, or job position, suggesting that the underlying dynamics of career decision-making are broadly applicable across individual profiles.

In conclusion, successful career development appears to result not only from rational, strategic planning but also from the ability to recognize and act upon unforeseen opportunities. Future research may expand on these findings by exploring cultural, generational, or sectoral differences and by using longitudinal designs to track how individual decisions evolve over time and influence long-term outcomes.

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