Acting like *Adults*

Gen Z's career-hopping may look like commitment phobia, but it is calculated.

In the FX show *Adults*, five twenty-somethings cram into one friend's childhood home, suspended between adolescence and adulthood. The series focuses on the characters' careers, rooted in half-formed ambitions and a precarious gig economy. One friend clings to an unglamourous job while the others drift between minimum-wage shifts, short-term contracts, and ideas that never fully evolve into employment.

Mainstream media has long reflected society, and *Adults* resonates with its audience because it captures a growing aspect of modern adulthood: Commitment, particularly of the professional kind, has become increasingly difficult to justify.

In rich economies such as the UK, young workers have an average tenure of 1.1 years in the first five years of their careers – according to recruitment firm Randstad – down from 3 years for baby-boomers. Early working life, once a linear path, now increasingly resembles a series of experiments.

It would be easy to dismiss this as impatience, entitlement, or a lack of loyalty. But the bigger picture is a lot more complicated. Early career decisions are increasingly being made under conditions of incomplete or shifting information. Randstad calls this 'growth-hunting' – young workers move because they are ambitious and more likely than any other generation to weigh long-term goals when changing jobs. Yet, the same survey reveals a more anxious reality. Entry-level roles are shrinking as artificial intelligence reorganises industries from the bottom up. Nearly half of youth worry AI will make their job redundant.

Ambition and anxiety can produce identical results: a reluctance to settle into one position. Commitment ceases to be a virtue, instead emerging as a bet on a future that may never materialise. If the skills required for success are constantly shifting, remaining flexible can seem more rational than remaining loyal.

Contemporary youth thus engage with an array of specialisations. As per reports, only 45% currently hold traditional roles, while a third would prefer to supplement income with a side hustle. Such behaviour is often interpreted as a result of ennui. In reality, in an unstable job market sending mixed signals about which skills will retain value, it is safer to spread one's wings by building experience.

But that is only half the story.

The characters in *Adults* are not just searching for stable employment; they are looking to define themselves. Earlier generations often inherited clearer expectations about adulthood. Careers were not considered the vehicles of self-expression they are today, with a job signifying identity and passion.

This cultural shift raises the stakes. If a career is meant to embody personal fulfilment, experimentation becomes difficult to distinguish from self-discovery. Job changes cease to signal a lack of commitment and instead become part of an ongoing search for authenticity.

Adults captures this tension particularly well. Unlike earlier sitcoms about youth, which treated career instability as temporary – like Rachel's trajectory from waitress to conventional success in *Friends* – the show offers little faith that stability lies around the corner. Its characters behave with the uncertainty that has come to define modern adulthood.

That should not be mistaken for a rejection of ambition. If anything, youth appear highly responsive to opportunity, constantly recalibrating in response to changing conditions. The stereotype of an entitled generation overlooks the uncomfortable possibility that today's workers face a more ambiguous landscape in which the payoff of commitment is difficult to calculate in advance.

The paradox is evident, with societal pressure and vulnerable employment juxtaposing against the ideal of doing what one loves. A system which rewards optionality also undermines the conditions that make long-term commitment valuable. More than half of Gen Z workers report delaying adulthood milestones, like further education and marriage, due to their financial situation. Each deferred decision preserves another option, causing a life postponed to keep the future open.

Perhaps the characters in *Adults* are not failing to grow up. They are responding rationally to a world that rewards uncertainty while demanding adaptability, survival, and authenticity. With a second season due this summer, the show may end up doing what the best cultural fiction often does: revealing less about its characters and more about the economic conditions and prevalent ethos that make them feel recognisable.