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Career Ascent, Stagnation, and Decline among Football Managers in Iran: A Grounded Theory Account of Professional Capital and Organizational Conditions

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to develop a grounded theory explanation of career ascent, stagnation, and decline among football managers in Iran by examining how professional capital, organizational conditions, intervening influences, managerial strategies, and career consequences interact across the managerial career trajectory. This qualitative, applied, and developmental study used the systematic grounded theory approach associated with Strauss and Corbin. The study was based on the completed doctoral investigation A Qualitative Analysis of the Snakes and Ladders Pattern in the Career Paths of Football Managers. Fifteen current or former head coaches and technical directors with 10–23 years of professional experience participated. Participants were selected through purposive sampling followed by theoretical sampling until conceptual adequacy was achieved. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews addressing career movement, organizational conditions, appointment and dismissal processes, managerial responses, and career consequences. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed concurrently through open, axial, and selective coding, constant comparison, and analytical memo writing. Coding consistency was additionally examined through independent review of selected transcripts. Analysis yielded 123 nonredundant open codes, 41 subcategories, and 18 main categories. The central phenomenon comprised three dynamic career states: career ascent, career stagnation, and career decline. Career movement was shaped by professional competence capital, professional reputation capital, relational and network capital, and adaptive career agency. Contextual conditions included club governance and executive structure, performance and result orientation, employment and contractual conditions, and football labor-market characteristics. Informal stakeholder influence, authority-responsibility imbalance, and media and supporter pressure operated as intervening conditions. Managers responded through career protection, reputation management, relationship maintenance, professional adaptation, and strategic re-entry. Consequences ranged from strengthened employability and accumulated professional capital to reputational erosion and occupational vulnerability. Football managerial careers in Iran follow a nonlinear and recursive “snakes-and-ladders” pattern in which professional capital interacts continuously with organizational opportunities and constraints, making ascent, stagnation, decline, and recovery contingent on both individual resources and institutional conditions.

Keywords: Career Ascent; Career Stagnation; Career Decline; Football Managers; Professional Capital; Organizational Conditions; Grounded Theory; Iran

Introduction

Career development in professional sport is rarely a linear process. This is particularly evident in football management, where advancement, stagnation, dismissal, occupational interruption, and professional re-entry can occur repeatedly across the career course. Unlike occupations in which promotion follows relatively stable organizational hierarchies and formalized

criteria, football managers operate in an environment characterized by intense performance scrutiny, short evaluation horizons, competition for a limited number of desirable positions, uncertainty regarding tenure, and substantial dependence on organizational decision makers. Consequently, the career path of a football manager may resemble a pattern of repeated ascents and declines rather than a predictable progression from lower to higher levels. The concepts of growth, stagnation, and decline provide a useful analytical framework for understanding such movement because they emphasize that professional trajectories are shaped by both internal capacities and external conditions. Growth may emerge from the accumulation and effective use of personal and professional resources, while stagnation may reflect barriers that prevent those resources from being converted into advancement, and decline may occur when accumulated advantages are weakened by adverse organizational or environmental conditions [1]. This dynamic perspective is especially relevant to football, where a period of professional success may rapidly generate access to more prestigious positions, whereas a short sequence of poor results, executive changes, or organizational conflict may abruptly reverse that trajectory.

Career stagnation is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the absence of formal promotion. It may include limited access to new responsibilities, repeated employment at the same occupational level, reduced professional learning, loss of visibility, declining motivation, perceived lack of future opportunities, or prolonged exclusion from desirable positions. Research on organizational inertia has shown that stagnation in career progression can arise when institutional structures become resistant to change and employees encounter environments that do not permit the effective use or development of their capabilities [2]. Similarly, career stagnation has been associated with consequences extending beyond the individual employee, because restricted development and reduced occupational movement may also influence managerial cognition, strategic thinking, and organizational effectiveness [3]. From this perspective, stagnation should not be regarded simply as a temporary absence of promotion. It may instead represent a distinct career condition in which accumulated experience no longer produces proportionate occupational mobility. For football managers, this may occur when a coach remains repeatedly confined to the same competitive level, is considered only for lower-status clubs despite extensive experience, or experiences lengthy periods outside employment despite maintaining professional competence.

The broader literature on stagnation also demonstrates that the phenomenon may emerge at organizational and institutional levels. Studies of scientific stagnation, for example, have identified combinations of structural restrictions, inadequate incentives, limited developmental opportunities, organizational weaknesses, and environmental barriers that can suppress professional progress even among capable individuals [4]. In other settings, stagnation has been linked to organizational incapacity to renew established routines or adapt effectively to changing technological and competitive conditions [5]. Likewise, analyses of innovation systems have shown that stagnation can persist when institutional arrangements, implementation practices, and established patterns constrain adaptation and suppress the generation or diffusion of new approaches [6]. Although these studies concern contexts different from professional football, their underlying insight is highly relevant: stagnation is often produced by an interaction between individual resources and the structures within which those resources must operate. A manager may possess substantial technical knowledge, leadership capacity, and professional experience, yet remain unable to translate those attributes into career advancement if the surrounding organizational environment restricts opportunity, undervalues competence, or prioritizes other appointment criteria.

This interaction between individual capability and environmental opportunity can be understood more clearly through the concept of professional capital. Professional capital encompasses the resources that individuals accumulate and mobilize in order to perform effectively, gain legitimacy, and sustain occupational development. These resources may include technical expertise, practical experience, professional judgment, social relationships, credibility, adaptability, and the capacity for continued learning. Research examining professional effectiveness has demonstrated that professional capital contributes to how individuals perform within complex occupational roles and how they respond to changing demands [7]. In professional contexts characterized by uncertainty, capital is not limited to formal qualifications or technical knowledge; it also includes social and relational resources that facilitate access to information, recognition, collaboration, and opportunity. Evidence from business settings similarly indicates that human capital and social capital jointly contribute to performance, while institutional support can strengthen or weaken the extent to which these resources generate favorable outcomes [8]. In football management, this implies that a coach's career position may depend not only on what the individual knows or has achieved but also on whether these resources are recognized, connected to relevant networks, and supported by organizational structures capable of converting them into meaningful career opportunities.

Human capital is therefore central to managerial career development, but its value is contingent on the conditions under which it is deployed. Human capital includes knowledge, experience, professional competence, judgment, and accumulated occupational capabilities that can improve decision-making and performance. Research has shown that experience and psychological resources can contribute to higher-quality professional judgment, particularly in complex occupational settings where individuals must make consequential decisions under uncertainty [9]. In football management, accumulated competitive experience may similarly improve tactical judgment, player management, crisis response, and the capacity to interpret unstable organizational environments. Yet expertise alone may not guarantee career ascent. The effectiveness of professional resources often depends on whether the surrounding organization provides sufficient authority, stability, and opportunity for those resources to be used. Human capital excellence is also closely connected to ethical conduct, social responsibility, and institutional conditions, especially under crisis circumstances where the quality of professional decision-making and organizational relationships becomes more consequential [10]. Thus, career advancement should be understood as a process in which competence is filtered through organizational structures, stakeholder expectations, and social recognition.

Psychological capital represents another important dimension of professional resilience and career continuity. Positive psychological resources such as self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism can influence professional engagement, persistence, and the capacity to respond adaptively to occupational difficulty. Evidence indicates that psychological capital and self-efficacy are associated with stronger professional engagement and a greater capacity to remain involved in demanding work roles [11]. Psychological capital has also been linked to professional commitment and burnout-related outcomes, suggesting that internal psychological resources can shape how individuals respond to prolonged occupational pressure and demanding professional environments [12]. For football managers, such resources may become especially salient after dismissal, public criticism, failed appointments, or periods without employment. The capacity to reinterpret setbacks, sustain confidence, engage in learning, and remain professionally active may differentiate temporary career decline from more enduring occupational marginalization. However, psychological resilience should not be treated as a substitute

for structural analysis. An exclusive focus on individual adaptability risks obscuring the fact that some career barriers arise from organizational arrangements over which managers have limited control.

The importance of adaptability is further reinforced by research on dynamic capabilities and self-leadership. In unstable or stagnant environments, individuals and organizations that can reconfigure their resources, update competencies, and respond flexibly to changing conditions may be better positioned to preserve performance and recover from disruption. Research conducted under conditions of economic stagnation has shown that dynamic capabilities can support performance when actors are required to respond to environmental uncertainty and structural constraints [13]. Similarly, self-leadership has been presented as an important mechanism for strengthening human capital professionals' development and performance by encouraging proactive learning, self-regulation, and adaptive behavior [14]. These ideas are particularly applicable to football management because the occupational environment is inherently unstable. Managers must continually update tactical knowledge, leadership methods, technological skills, player-management approaches, and public communication strategies. A coach who fails to adapt may become professionally outdated even after earlier success, whereas a manager who actively renews competencies may be able to reconstruct professional credibility following a period of stagnation or decline.

Nevertheless, the football manager's career is not determined solely by competence, adaptability, or psychological resources. Organizational and political dynamics can substantially influence professional outcomes. Individuals frequently operate within institutions where formal authority, informal influence, role conflict, and organizational adaptability interact in ways that affect occupational behavior. Research examining professional-organizational conflict indicates that organizational adaptability can shape the relationship between individual orientations and professional outcomes, demonstrating that the organizational environment may mediate or alter how professional dispositions are expressed [15]. In football clubs, this problem may be intensified by ambiguity concerning who controls recruitment, staffing, disciplinary decisions, tactical priorities, or communication with stakeholders. A manager may be formally accountable for results while lacking full authority over critical performance-related decisions. Such authority-responsibility imbalances can produce career vulnerability because poor results may be attributed to the manager even when important determinants of performance lie outside that individual's effective control.

Organizational conditions also determine whether professional capital is accumulated or eroded over time. Stable governance, consistent evaluation criteria, contractual clarity, and strategic alignment may allow managers to translate knowledge and experience into sustained performance. Conversely, executive turnover, conflicting expectations, unstable contracts, and short-term evaluation can interrupt professional development and contribute to abrupt downward mobility. The concept of organizational inertia is particularly relevant in this regard because institutions may continue relying on established patterns of appointment, evaluation, or decision-making even when such patterns limit learning and career development [2]. Similarly, technological and organizational stagnation may arise when systems fail to renew their operational logic in response to environmental change [5]. Football clubs that repeatedly replace managers without addressing structural performance problems may therefore reproduce conditions of instability while interpreting each managerial change as an individualized solution.

The scarcity of attractive managerial positions further intensifies these dynamics. Professional football contains a limited number of high-status head-coaching and technical-management roles, while many experienced candidates compete for

them. This creates a labor market in which relatively small differences in reputation, timing, relationships, and perceived risk can have substantial career consequences. Broader economic research has shown that stagnation and growth are shaped by structural transformations, resource allocation, technological change, and the capacity of systems to adapt to shifting conditions [16]. Although football management differs markedly from macroeconomic systems, the underlying principle that growth and stagnation are structurally conditioned is applicable. The supply of positions, patterns of replacement, club financial capacity, and institutional stability create an opportunity structure within which individual managers must compete. Career stagnation may therefore occur not because a manager's professional capital has disappeared but because the available system cannot absorb or reward it at the expected level.

Social capital is especially important under such conditions of scarcity. Networks can provide information regarding vacancies, generate recommendations, preserve professional visibility, and create pathways back into employment after dismissal. However, network effects are complex. Social capital can function positively by connecting competent individuals with opportunities, but it can also contribute to perceived unfairness when access to positions depends excessively on informal relationships rather than transparent evaluation. The interaction between human and social capital documented in other professional and entrepreneurial contexts suggests that performance and advancement are often strongest when competence and relational resources operate together rather than independently [8]. This distinction is central to football management. A technically capable manager with limited network access may remain professionally invisible, while a well-connected manager may gain opportunities more rapidly. Yet relational access without sufficient competence may also produce fragile ascent if the individual cannot consolidate the appointment through credible performance. Career mobility thus reflects the interaction of substantive capability, symbolic reputation, and relational positioning.

Reputation constitutes a further mechanism through which past performance affects future opportunity. In professional football, a manager's career history is continuously interpreted by club executives, media, supporters, agents, players, and other stakeholders. Success may accumulate as reputational capital, reducing perceived appointment risk and creating access to higher-level positions. Conversely, repeated dismissal or prolonged unemployment may erode legitimacy even when contextual factors contributed heavily to earlier failures. This process can become self-reinforcing: successful appointments generate better future opportunities, whereas negative labeling may reduce access to the kinds of positions needed to rebuild professional standing. Research on professional judgment and capital suggests that accumulated experience and psychological resources can improve decision quality and strengthen professional legitimacy [9], while strong professional capital can also enhance effectiveness when individuals are able to translate knowledge and relationships into recognized performance [7]. Therefore, career ascent and decline cannot be understood without examining how performance histories become socially interpreted and converted into future employment consequences.

Professional decline should likewise be distinguished from a single unsuccessful appointment. Decline becomes analytically meaningful when a setback produces downward movement in occupational status, reduced access to opportunities, reputational damage, prolonged unemployment, or movement toward less desirable positions. The broader literature on growth and decline emphasizes that downward trajectories frequently reflect cumulative processes rather than isolated events [1]. In football management, a dismissal may be only a temporary interruption for a manager with strong professional capital and network support, whereas the same event may initiate a prolonged period of marginalization for someone with weaker relational resources or less established legitimacy. The capacity to recover may depend on adaptive

learning, strategic acceptance of transitional roles, and continued professional involvement. Self-leadership and human capital renewal are relevant here because career reconstruction requires individuals to reassess their position, maintain motivation, and develop competencies that restore employability [14].

At the same time, crisis conditions may expose the ethical and institutional dimensions of professional advancement. Human capital development cannot be separated from the quality of governance, professional ethics, and organizational responsibility, particularly when institutions operate under pressure [10]. Football management involves consequential decisions regarding players, technical staff, contracts, resource allocation, and organizational representation. Career systems that privilege unstable political considerations, informal interference, or inconsistent evaluation may undermine both managerial development and organizational effectiveness. Conversely, transparent governance and clearly defined responsibilities can allow professional capital to be evaluated more fairly. This distinction becomes especially important when interpreting decline: not every downward career movement necessarily indicates professional incompetence, just as not every advancement necessarily reflects superior capability.

The available literature therefore provides important insights into stagnation, professional capital, human capital, psychological resources, organizational inertia, adaptability, social capital, and occupational performance. However, these strands have rarely been integrated into an explanatory account of how football managers move among ascent, stagnation, decline, and renewed advancement. Existing research on stagnation has largely focused on employees, academic settings, organizational innovation, or broader economic processes [3, 4, 6, 16], while work on professional and psychological capital has generally examined effectiveness, engagement, commitment, judgment, or organizational performance rather than nonlinear career transitions in football management [7, 11, 12]. Likewise, studies of dynamic capabilities and social capital show that adaptability and networks matter under difficult environmental conditions [8, 13], but they do not explain how these resources interact with club governance, appointment practices, authority structures, performance pressure, and managerial responses across successive career stages. This gap is particularly important in Iranian football, where managerial careers unfold within distinctive organizational, institutional, relational, and competitive conditions that may intensify discontinuity between professional competence and actual career progression.

Accordingly, a grounded theory approach is valuable because it allows career development to be examined as a process rather than as a collection of isolated predictors. It enables attention to be directed toward how professional capital is accumulated, recognized, blocked, weakened, and reconstructed; how organizational conditions create ladders or downward pressures; how managers respond strategically to career disruption; and how the consequences of one career episode shape access to subsequent opportunities. Rather than assuming that successful managers rise and unsuccessful managers fall in a straightforward manner, such an approach can illuminate the recursive interactions through which the same individual may experience advancement, stagnation, decline, and recovery at different points in the career course. This perspective also helps reconcile the importance of individual agency with the influence of structures, because neither professional capital nor organizational conditions alone can adequately explain career movement. The career trajectory is instead produced through their interaction over time.

The aim of this study was to develop a grounded theory explanation of career ascent, stagnation, and decline among football managers in Iran by identifying how professional capital, organizational conditions, intervening influences, managerial strategies, and career consequences interact across the managerial career trajectory.

Methodology

This study was a qualitative, applied, and developmental investigation based on the systematic grounded theory approach. Within this framework, career ascent, stagnation, decline, dismissal, re-entry, and professional recovery were treated as interconnected components of a dynamic managerial career process rather than as isolated occupational events. The present article provides a focused presentation of findings from the completed source study and therefore does not constitute an independent replication, secondary recruitment exercise, or new round of empirical data collection. The conceptual meanings of the categories were preserved in accordance with the original analysis. The analytical presentation was organized around the grounded theory distinction among causal conditions, the central phenomenon, contextual conditions, and intervening conditions. These terms were used in their grounded theory sense to describe the position of categories within an explanatory process and should not be interpreted as statistical estimates of causation. Consistent with Corbin and Strauss (2015), the analysis sought to explain how conditions, interactions, and professional responses combined to shape changes in managerial career trajectories. Furthermore, in line with Suddaby (2006), the study aimed to move beyond the descriptive enumeration of themes by constructing relationships among categories that could explain upward movement, stagnation, decline, and subsequent career transitions within Iranian football management.

Participants consisted of current or former head coaches and technical directors who had direct professional experience with recruitment, appointment, advancement, employment instability, career stagnation, dismissal, organizational marginalization, professional decline, or return to managerial employment in Iranian football. Eligibility required a minimum of five years of coaching or technical-management experience, familiarity with appointment and evaluation processes within professional or competitive football, willingness to participate voluntarily, and the ability to provide detailed reflective accounts of career experiences. Individuals whose professional activity had been limited exclusively to specialist positions such as fitness coaching, conditioning, goalkeeper coaching, or other narrowly defined technical roles were not considered primary participants unless they had subsequently assumed responsibilities as a head coach, technical director, or comparable managerial leader. This criterion was adopted because the phenomenon under investigation concerned the trajectory of individuals occupying positions in which they were exposed to appointment decisions, performance evaluation, organizational authority, dismissal, career mobility, and professional re-entry.

Sampling began purposively and was designed to achieve variation in participants' competitive level, professional experience, gender, employment status, organizational setting, and exposure to different career events. As data analysis progressed, sampling became increasingly theoretical, with subsequent participant selection and interview questioning guided by conceptual issues emerging from earlier interviews. Particular attention was given to experiences involving dismissal following short-term performance results, recruitment through professional and interpersonal networks, limitations on formal managerial authority, discrepancies between responsibility and decision-making power, periods of unemployment or professional marginalization, and mechanisms through which managers returned to football employment. Sampling continued until the original researcher judged that the principal categories were sufficiently developed in terms of their properties, dimensions, and relationships and that additional interviews were no longer generating conceptually important information relevant to the developing explanatory framework. This judgment reflected theoretical adequacy rather than a numerical sample-size calculation or an attempt to achieve statistical representativeness, which is consistent with qualitative

sampling principles emphasizing informational richness and conceptual development rather than population estimation (Malterud et al., 2016).

A total of 15 football managers participated in the study. The sample included 12 men and three women, and participants reported between 10 and 23 years of professional experience. Their backgrounds represented diverse areas of Iranian football, including the men's Premier League, lower professional divisions, a youth national team, club youth structures, football academies, and women's football. This variation enabled the analysis to capture career experiences occurring across different competitive and organizational environments. Nevertheless, the study was not designed to statistically compare male and female managers, managers from different competitive levels, or individuals employed in different sectors of football. Participant characteristics therefore served to describe the experiential range of the sample rather than to support subgroup prevalence estimates, statistical ranking, or population-level generalization. The unit of analytical interest was the managerial career trajectory and the processes through which individual professional resources interacted with organizational and environmental conditions to facilitate career ascent, produce stagnation, or contribute to professional decline.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured, in-depth interviews developed specifically for the grounded theory investigation. The interview guide contained six broad questions designed to elicit participants' experiences and interpretations of managerial career movement, including the nature of career advancement and decline, conditions contributing to changes in professional position, organizational and interpersonal influences on appointment or dismissal, managers' responses to career opportunities and constraints, and the perceived consequences of upward or downward career transitions. Rather than functioning as a standardized questionnaire, the interview guide served as a flexible framework that allowed participants to describe the sequence and meaning of events in their own terms while enabling the interviewer to pursue theoretically relevant issues that emerged during the conversation. The initial interview questions were reviewed by the dissertation supervisor and advisers as well as specialists in sport management, football, and grounded theory methodology. Their assessments focused on clarity, relevance to the research phenomenon, conceptual adequacy, and the capacity of the questions to generate sufficiently detailed narratives. The guide was subsequently revised according to their recommendations before the main interviews were conducted.

The semi-structured format permitted extensive probing and follow-up questioning. Participants were encouraged to explain how particular appointments or dismissals developed, which organizational or professional factors they believed contributed to those events, how relationships with club executives and other stakeholders influenced their opportunities, and how specific experiences affected their subsequent career decisions. Follow-up prompts also explored less visible dimensions of managerial work that could not necessarily be inferred from formal job titles or competitive results, including exclusion from strategic decisions, limitations imposed on squad selection or staffing decisions, interference from organizational actors, and discrepancies between the formal accountability assigned to a manager and the actual authority available to exercise that responsibility. This flexible interviewing approach was particularly important because the study sought to understand the mechanisms underlying career movement rather than merely identify observable employment events.

Most interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through synchronous online communication. In circumstances in which geographical access, scheduling limitations, or professional commitments prevented synchronous participation,

individuals were provided with the interview questions and submitted recorded responses. Clarifying questions were subsequently exchanged whenever the original responses required elaboration or when emerging concepts warranted further exploration. According to the source dissertation, the average amount of recorded material was approximately 60 minutes per participant, including the cumulative duration of recorded responses in cases in which the interview was completed asynchronously. Participants' permission was obtained before recording. Audio materials were subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the content and terminology used by participants as closely as possible. Field notes were also maintained to document contextual observations, emerging analytical ideas, possible relationships among concepts, and issues requiring exploration in later interviews. Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently, allowing insights generated during earlier interviews to shape the direction and depth of later inquiry, as required by grounded theory methodology. Details not clearly documented in the source study, including a specific calendar range for interviews, a dedicated qualitative software package, refusal rates, or the exact number of follow-up exchanges, are not introduced in the present article in order to avoid retrospective reconstruction of undocumented procedures.

Data analysis followed the systematic grounded theory procedures of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Analysis began during data collection and involved repeated reading of interview transcripts, identification of meaningful passages, comparison of incidents across interviews, development and refinement of codes, and continuous analytical memo writing. During open coding, interview material was examined closely to identify concepts representing participants' experiences of career advancement, professional stagnation, loss of position, organizational restriction, dismissal, networking, professional reputation, employment recovery, and related processes. Codes were initially maintained close to participants' reported experiences while progressively being compared across transcripts to identify conceptual similarities, differences, recurring properties, and variations in meaning. Constant comparison was used throughout the analytical process so that newly identified incidents could be examined against previously coded material and emerging concepts could be revised as additional evidence accumulated.

During axial coding, conceptually related open codes were grouped into subcategories and broader categories, and relationships among these categories were examined. Particular attention was paid to how individual professional resources, interpersonal relations, institutional structures, organizational practices, employment conditions, and managerial responses interacted across different stages of the career trajectory. The analytical framework differentiated conditions associated with the emergence of the focal career phenomenon from contextual and intervening factors that influenced the form or direction of managerial movement. This procedure enabled the researchers to examine not only what participants experienced but also the conditions under which career ascent, stagnation, decline, or return became more likely within their accounts. In accordance with grounded theory logic, descriptions of causal conditions were interpreted as conceptual relationships within participants' accounts and the resulting explanatory model rather than as statistically demonstrated causal effects.

Selective coding was subsequently used to integrate the major categories around the central career process conceptualized through the metaphor of a "snakes and ladders" pattern. Within this model, managerial careers were characterized by discontinuous upward and downward movements rather than by a uniformly progressive occupational sequence. Categories representing professional capital, organizational opportunity structures, constraints on managerial authority, relationship networks, performance evaluation, employment instability, and responses to career setbacks were progressively integrated to explain how managers could move upward, remain professionally stagnant, experience sudden

decline, or regain access to managerial positions. Analytical memos were used throughout coding to document conceptual decisions, relationships among categories, unresolved questions, and changes in the developing theoretical structure. The completed analytical framework contained 123 nonredundant open codes, 41 subcategories, and 18 main categories. Earlier sections of the source dissertation contained inconsistent reports of the number of initial codes, with the abstract and conclusion reporting 170 initial codes and one chapter-four passage reporting 165; therefore, the present article reports the agreed final analytical counts and does not rely on the inconsistent preliminary-code totals.

Several procedures were used to enhance analytical trustworthiness and procedural consistency. The iterative relationship between data collection and analysis facilitated theoretical sampling and enabled concepts emerging from early interviews to be examined in later accounts. Constant comparison supported refinement of category boundaries, while memo writing created an analytical record of the development of the conceptual framework. In addition, an independent collaborating coder reviewed selected interview material using the study's coding guidance, and areas of agreement and disagreement were compared with the original researcher's coding. Interviews 6, 9, and 12 were included in this coding comparison and yielded reported agreement levels of 78.38%, 81.58%, and 88.89%, respectively. Across 120 reviewed coding decisions, 100 agreements and 20 disagreements were reported, resulting in an overall percentage agreement of 83.33%. This value was interpreted strictly as percentage agreement between coders rather than as Cohen's kappa or as an analogue of psychometric reliability. Consistent with methodological cautions regarding intercoder agreement in qualitative research, this procedure was used to demonstrate transparency and consistency in coding rather than to imply that a single objectively correct interpretation of the qualitative material existed (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The credibility of the final grounded theory account was therefore based on the cumulative use of systematic coding, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, analytical memoing, category integration, variation in participant experience, and independent examination of selected coding decisions rather than on any single numerical index of reliability.

Findings and Results

Fifteen current or former football managers participated in the study, comprising 12 men (80.0%) and three women (20.0%). Participants had between 10 and 23 years of professional experience in coaching, technical management, or both, providing the study with accounts from individuals who had experienced multiple stages of managerial careers rather than only initial entry into the profession. Their professional backgrounds covered the men's Premier League, lower competitive divisions, youth national-team football, club youth structures, football academies, and women's football. This variation was important because career ascent, stagnation, and decline were reported in organizational environments differing substantially in visibility, financial resources, employment stability, stakeholder pressure, and the degree of managerial autonomy. Participants described experiences that included initial appointment, promotion to more prestigious teams or competitions, repeated employment at similar competitive levels, temporary or prolonged unemployment, involuntary dismissal, organizational marginalization, restricted authority, professional reputation loss, and eventual return to coaching or technical-management positions. Because the study was qualitative and theoretically oriented, these characteristics were used to establish experiential diversity rather than to estimate the prevalence of particular career trajectories among Iranian football managers. The constant-comparative analysis produced 123 nonredundant open codes, which were integrated into 41 subcategories and finally organized into 18 main categories. These categories formed a process model in which

professional capital interacted with organizational, relational, competitive, and institutional conditions to create upward "ladders," periods of stagnation, or downward "snakes" in managerial careers.

Table 1

Overall grounded theory coding structure of career ascent, stagnation, and decline among Iranian football managers

Paradigm component	Main category	Principal subcategories	Number of subcategories	Number of final open codes
Causal conditions	Professional competence capital	Technical-tactical expertise; leadership and team management; accumulated competitive experience	3	10
Causal conditions	Professional reputation capital	Credibility based on previous results; perceived professional legitimacy	2	8
Causal conditions	Relational and network capital	Executive relationships; professional networks; brokerage and access to opportunities	3	9
Causal conditions	Adaptive career agency	Strategic career decision-making; learning and self-renewal	2	7
Central phenomenon	Career ascent	Entry into higher-level positions; expansion of managerial responsibility	2	8
Central phenomenon	Career stagnation	Repeated employment at the same level; restricted upward mobility	2	7
Central phenomenon	Career decline	Loss of occupational position; downward movement or exclusion	2	7
Contextual conditions	Club governance and executive structure	Stability of club leadership; quality of managerial decision-making	2	8
Contextual conditions	Performance and result orientation	Short-term result pressure; instability of performance evaluation	2	7
Contextual conditions	Employment and contractual environment	Contract insecurity; vulnerability of managerial tenure	2	7
Contextual conditions	Football labor-market characteristics	Limited high-status vacancies; intense competition for appointments	2	6
Intervening conditions	Informal influence and stakeholder pressure	Executive interference; external influence on decisions; political or financial pressure	3	7
Intervening conditions	Authority-responsibility imbalance	Limited decision authority; accountability without adequate control	2	6
Intervening conditions	Media and supporter environment	Media framing of performance; supporter expectations and pressure	2	5
Strategies	Career protection and position management	Relationship maintenance; reputation protection; negotiation of organizational boundaries	3	6
Strategies	Career reconstruction and professional adaptation	Skill development; acceptance of transitional roles; strategic re-entry	3	6
Consequences	Strengthening of career position	Greater employability; accumulation of professional and reputational capital	2	5
Consequences	Career erosion and occupational vulnerability	Reputational decline; prolonged marginalization or instability	2	4
Total	18 main categories	41 subcategories	41	123

Table 1 summarizes the complete analytical architecture produced through open, axial, and selective coding. The 123 final open codes were reduced through constant comparison to 41 subcategories and 18 main categories, which were subsequently located within the systematic grounded theory paradigm. Four categories represented causal conditions, three represented the central career phenomenon, four described the organizational and labor-market context, three operated as intervening conditions, two captured managerial strategies, and two represented consequences. The coding structure showed that participants did not understand managerial career development as a simple function of coaching ability or match results. Instead, career movement was described as emerging from the interaction of several forms of professional capital with organizational opportunities and constraints. Technical and leadership competence could create the potential for advancement, but its conversion into an actual appointment depended heavily on reputation, access to professional networks, executive decision-making, and the availability of positions. Similarly, unfavorable results did not automatically produce decline, because some managers were able to protect their occupational position through accumulated credibility, strong networks, or successful strategic adaptation. Conversely, participants described circumstances in which technically

competent managers experienced stagnation or dismissal when formal authority was restricted, club governance was unstable, or appointment and evaluation processes were dominated by short-term or informal considerations. The three-part central phenomenon of ascent, stagnation, and decline therefore represented alternative states within a dynamic career process rather than mutually exclusive permanent career types. Managers could move repeatedly between these states over time, giving rise to the "snakes and ladders" pattern that integrated the final grounded theory.

Table 2

Causal conditions and forms of professional capital underlying managerial career movement

Main category	Subcategory	Analytical meaning in participants' accounts	Typical manifestation in the career trajectory
Professional competence capital	Technical-tactical expertise	Capacity to design, organize, and adjust football performance systems	Increased credibility for appointment or advancement when results supported perceived competence
Professional competence capital	Leadership and team management	Ability to manage players, staff, conflict, motivation, and dressing-room dynamics	Greater organizational confidence and enhanced likelihood of continued employment
Professional competence capital	Accumulated competitive experience	Practical knowledge developed through repeated exposure to professional football environments	Reduced perceived appointment risk and stronger legitimacy for higher-level positions
Professional reputation capital	Credibility based on previous results	Symbolic value attached to successful seasons, promotions, championships, or visible achievements	Creation of a reputational "ladder" leading to better appointments and stronger bargaining position
Professional reputation capital	Perceived professional legitimacy	General belief among executives and football actors that the manager belongs at a particular competitive level	Protection against temporary performance fluctuations and increased re-employment probability
Relational and network capital	Executive relationships	Direct professional relationships with club owners, boards, chief executives, or decision makers	Improved access to appointment opportunities and information regarding vacancies
Relational and network capital	Professional networks	Connections with coaches, agents, players, technical staff, former colleagues, and football intermediaries	Continuous circulation of employment information and recommendations
Relational and network capital	Brokerage and access to opportunities	Presence of influential actors capable of introducing or supporting the manager	Acceleration of entry or return to managerial employment
Adaptive career agency	Strategic career decision-making	Deliberate choice of clubs, roles, timing, and employment conditions	Avoidance of excessively risky appointments and preservation of career continuity
Adaptive career agency	Learning and self-renewal	Updating knowledge, qualifications, tactical ideas, and management practices	Restoration of professional relevance after stagnation or dismissal

Table 2 presents the four causal categories that formed the professional-capital foundation of career movement. The findings indicated that participants perceived professional competence as necessary but rarely sufficient for sustained ascent. Technical-tactical knowledge, leadership capacity, and accumulated experience established an initial base of occupational legitimacy, but these resources acquired greater career value when they were transformed into visible reputation and recognized by influential organizational actors. Previous success operated as a form of symbolic capital: a manager associated with promotion, competitive achievement, player development, or organizational improvement could become a lower-risk appointment in the eyes of club executives. This reputational effect was especially important because managers described football recruitment as occurring under uncertainty, where decision makers often had limited time to evaluate candidates comprehensively. Relational capital therefore acted as a mechanism through which competence and reputation became visible and actionable. Participants repeatedly differentiated between "having ability" and "being positioned where ability is seen." Relationships with executives, agents, former colleagues, influential players, and other members of the football network could provide information about vacancies, facilitate recommendations, or restore access to employment after dismissal. However, the analysis did not indicate that relational capital functioned independently of professional legitimacy in every case. Rather, its effect was frequently described as cumulative and interactive: competence created a substantive basis, reputation made that competence socially recognizable, and networks increased the probability that both would be considered at the moment of appointment. Adaptive career agency constituted the fourth component. Managers who deliberately selected appointments, rejected highly unstable conditions, continued professional education, revised technical

approaches, or temporarily accepted lower-profile roles were better able to preserve career continuity. Thus, the causal structure was best interpreted as a portfolio of professional capital rather than a single determinant of advancement.

Table 3

Organizational, contextual, and intervening conditions shaping ascent, stagnation, and decline

Condition type	Main category	Key condition	Career effect identified in the analysis
Contextual	Club governance and executive structure	Stable leadership and consistent strategic direction	Facilitated longer managerial tenure, clearer expectations, and cumulative performance development
Contextual	Club governance and executive structure	Executive turnover or fragmented decision-making	Increased uncertainty, weakened previous agreements, and raised dismissal risk
Contextual	Performance and result orientation	Short-term evaluation based primarily on immediate match outcomes	Reduced tolerance for developmental periods and accelerated downward career movement
Contextual	Performance and result orientation	Inconsistent or changing evaluation criteria	Made professional performance difficult to predict and weakened managerial security
Contextual	Employment and contractual environment	Short-duration or weakly protected contracts	Increased vulnerability to abrupt dismissal and reduced managerial bargaining power
Contextual	Employment and contractual environment	Unclear contractual authority and obligations	Increased conflict regarding responsibilities and performance accountability
Contextual	Football labor-market characteristics	Limited supply of prestigious managerial positions	Intensified competition and prolonged waiting periods between appointments
Contextual	Football labor-market characteristics	High substitutability of managers	Encouraged rapid replacement after performance setbacks
Intervening	Informal influence and stakeholder pressure	Executive interference in technical decisions	Reduced managerial autonomy and complicated attribution of results
Intervening	Informal influence and stakeholder pressure	Influence of powerful external actors	Altered appointment, retention, or dismissal processes independently of formal evaluation
Intervening	Informal influence and stakeholder pressure	Financial and political pressures	Constrained squad, staffing, and organizational choices
Intervening	Authority-responsibility imbalance	Restricted authority over players, staff, or recruitment	Limited capacity to implement the manager's preferred performance model
Intervening	Authority-responsibility imbalance	Full accountability despite incomplete control	Increased exposure to reputational damage when results deteriorated
Intervening	Media and supporter environment	Intensified negative media framing	Amplified perceptions of crisis and increased pressure for managerial change
Intervening	Media and supporter environment	High supporter expectations	Shortened perceived acceptable time for performance recovery

Table 3 demonstrates that the direction of managerial careers depended substantially on the organizational environment in which professional capital was deployed. Participants described stable governance as one of the strongest conditions for converting professional competence into sustained career development. When club leadership remained consistent, expectations were clearly communicated, and managerial authority was aligned with assigned responsibilities, coaches could implement longer-term plans and were more likely to be evaluated across a meaningful period. In contrast, executive turnover frequently disrupted previously established agreements and could alter the criteria by which managers were judged. A manager appointed under one executive structure could become organizationally vulnerable after the arrival of a new president, board, owner, or technical director, even without a substantial change in sporting performance. Short-term result orientation further intensified this instability. Participants described environments in which a small sequence of unfavorable results could redefine perceptions of managerial competence and rapidly transform a previously ascending career into one characterized by dismissal and reputational uncertainty. Contractual insecurity reinforced this vulnerability because weak or short-term agreements provided limited protection against abrupt organizational change. The labor-market context compounded the problem: prestigious managerial positions were comparatively scarce, while many qualified and experienced individuals competed for them, making dismissal consequential beyond the loss of a single job. Intervening conditions further modified this process. Executive interference, informal stakeholder influence, financial restrictions,

pressure from influential actors, and authority-responsibility imbalance could reduce the manager's effective control over performance while leaving formal accountability intact. Media and supporter pressure functioned as amplifiers because deteriorating results were transformed into broader public narratives of failure. Consequently, career decline was often constructed through a combination of sporting outcomes and organizational interpretation rather than through results alone.

Table 4

Managerial strategies for protecting, reconstructing, and redirecting the career trajectory

Main strategy	Substrategy	Description	Intended career function
Career protection and position management	Relationship maintenance	Sustaining professional communication with executives, peers, players, agents, and other football actors	Preserving visibility, information access, and future appointment opportunities
Career protection and position management	Reputation protection	Managing public explanations, avoiding unnecessary conflict, and preserving professional credibility after setbacks	Limiting reputational spillover from a single dismissal or poor period
Career protection and position management	Negotiation of organizational boundaries	Seeking clarity regarding authority, staffing, recruitment, and evaluation expectations	Reducing exposure to responsibility for decisions outside managerial control
Career reconstruction and professional adaptation	Skill development	Updating tactical, analytical, technological, leadership, and management competencies	Increasing employability and demonstrating continued professional relevance
Career reconstruction and professional adaptation	Acceptance of transitional roles	Temporarily accepting lower-level, youth, academy, assistant, or technical positions where appropriate	Maintaining occupational continuity and facilitating re-entry into the managerial market
Career reconstruction and professional adaptation	Strategic re-entry	Selecting the timing and organizational setting of a return following dismissal or unemployment	Rebuilding reputation through a comparatively manageable opportunity

Table 4 shows that managers were not represented as passive recipients of organizational decisions. Although many conditions influencing career movement existed outside individual control, participants described a range of strategies intended to reduce vulnerability and restore career momentum. Career protection involved continuous maintenance of professional relationships rather than contacting influential actors only after unemployment occurred. Managers emphasized the importance of remaining visible within the football community, maintaining respectful relationships even after difficult separations, and avoiding interpersonal conflicts that could restrict future opportunities. Reputation management was particularly important following dismissal. Participants' accounts suggested that a managerial exit could become damaging not only because of the immediate employment loss but also because the event might be interpreted by other clubs as evidence of reduced competence. Managers therefore sought to preserve professional narratives that distinguished structural problems, restricted authority, or contextual limitations from personal failure. Boundary negotiation represented another protective strategy. Some participants described the importance of clarifying decision rights regarding player recruitment, technical staff, disciplinary matters, or performance objectives before or during an appointment. When managers entered positions with substantial formal accountability but little substantive control, the risk of career damage increased. Career reconstruction strategies were more prominent after stagnation or decline. Participants described professional education, tactical updating, use of performance-analysis technologies, observation of contemporary football systems, and improvement in leadership capabilities as methods of signaling professional renewal. Temporary acceptance of less prestigious positions was also described as a potentially strategic rather than purely downward move. A youth-team, academy, technical, or lower-division role could preserve involvement in football, generate new relationships, provide recent achievements, and create a platform for later return. The key distinction was between uncontrolled decline and deliberate transitional repositioning. Strategic re-entry therefore involved selecting a new appointment whose organizational conditions allowed a reasonable possibility of rebuilding professional capital rather than accepting any available role immediately after dismissal.

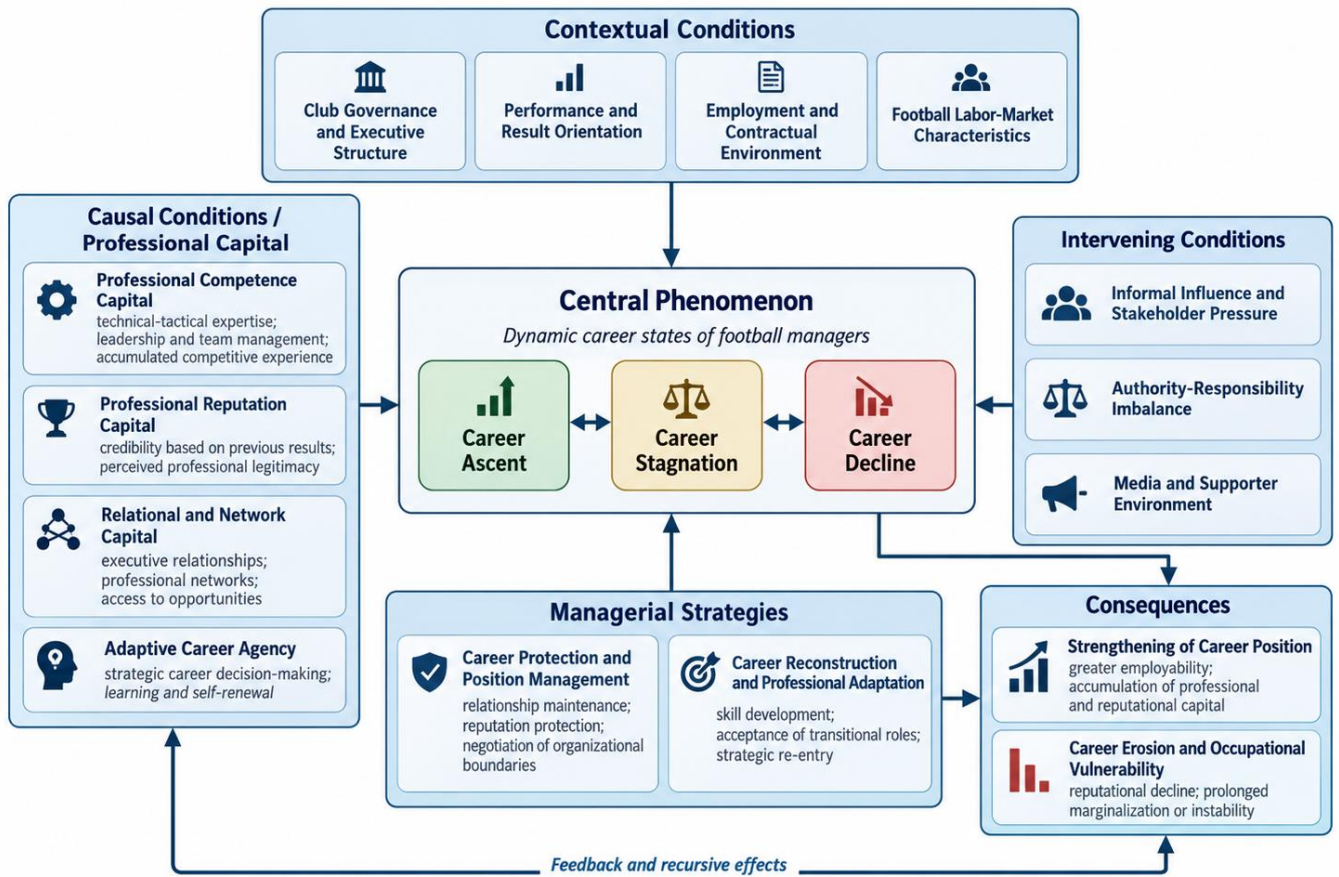
Table 5*Career consequences and recurrent trajectory configurations identified in the grounded theory*

Trajectory configuration	Dominant combination of conditions	Immediate consequence	Longer-term career implication
Sustained ascent	Strong competence + positive reputation + effective networks + supportive organizational context	Appointment to more prestigious or responsible positions	Accumulation of professional capital and increased bargaining power
Accelerated ascent	Strong relational access + visible prior achievement + favorable vacancy timing	Rapid movement into higher-level managerial roles	Potential for substantial career growth but vulnerability if competence and results do not consolidate the promotion
Stable plateau	Adequate competence + moderate reputation + limited opportunity structure	Repeated employment at similar competitive level	Career continuity without substantial upward mobility
Constrained stagnation	Strong competence + weak network access or restricted organizational recognition	Difficulty obtaining appointments consistent with experience	Gradual erosion of visibility and reduced access to elite opportunities
Abrupt decline	Poor short-term results + unstable governance + strong media/executive pressure	Dismissal or rapid loss of position	Reputational damage and increased difficulty obtaining comparable employment
Organizationally induced decline	Restricted authority + external interference + accountability for outcomes	Performance problems attributed to the manager despite limited control	Perceived unfair career erosion and reduced managerial legitimacy
Recovery trajectory	Prior reputation + adaptive learning + network support + strategic re-entry	Return to employment after dismissal or unemployment	Restoration of employability and potential renewed ascent
Recurrent snakes-and-ladders trajectory	Alternating favorable and unfavorable combinations of professional and organizational conditions	Repeated movement between ascent, stagnation, dismissal, and return	Nonlinear career characterized by instability rather than permanent success or failure

Table 5 integrates the findings into recurrent career configurations and demonstrates why the metaphor of "snakes and ladders" became the core interpretive structure of the study. Sustained ascent occurred when professional competence, reputation, relational access, and supportive organizational conditions reinforced one another. Under these circumstances, success in one position generated credibility that increased access to a more prestigious subsequent appointment, creating a cumulative ladder effect. Accelerated ascent differed because advancement could occur very rapidly when a visible achievement coincided with strong relational access and an available position. Participants nevertheless suggested that rapid advancement was potentially unstable when the manager entered a level at which organizational demands exceeded the professional capital that had already been consolidated. A stable plateau reflected continued employability without significant promotion. Such managers remained active but repeatedly circulated within comparable leagues, clubs, or responsibility levels. Constrained stagnation was conceptually different because participants attributed the absence of advancement not to insufficient competence but to weak network access, limited recognition, scarce vacancies, or unfavorable organizational positioning. Abrupt decline frequently followed a combination of unfavorable short-term results, unstable governance, public pressure, and rapid executive reaction. Organizationally induced decline represented a particularly important pattern because managers described situations in which they were held accountable for outcomes while lacking meaningful control over recruitment, staffing, or other performance-related decisions. Recovery occurred when managers successfully mobilized residual reputation, relationships, learning, and strategic choice to regain employment. The final trajectory, recurrent snakes-and-ladders movement, captured the most comprehensive interpretation of managerial careers: neither ascent nor decline was necessarily permanent. A manager could climb through achievement and recognition, encounter sudden organizational decline, remain outside desirable positions, and later regain career momentum through professional adaptation and renewed opportunity. Thus, the career process was nonlinear, path dependent, and highly sensitive to the interaction between professional capital and organizational conditions.

Figure 1

Grounded theory model of career ascent, stagnation, and decline among football managers in Iran: interaction of professional capital, organizational conditions, managerial strategies, and career consequences



The selective coding stage integrated all 18 main categories around the central process of movement among career ascent, stagnation, and decline. The resulting model conceptualized professional capital as the principal resource base from which managerial movement became possible, while organizational conditions determined the extent to which this capital could be converted into occupational opportunity. Professional competence, reputation, relational resources, and adaptive agency generated the capacity for movement, but their effects were filtered through club governance, performance expectations, contractual security, labor-market scarcity, stakeholder influence, managerial autonomy, media pressure, and supporter expectations. Career ascent occurred when professional capital and organizational opportunity were mutually reinforcing. Stagnation emerged when managers possessed sufficient capital to remain employable but encountered barriers that prevented movement to more desirable positions. Decline occurred when accumulated professional resources were weakened by poor results, organizational instability, reputational damage, restricted authority, or loss of network access. Importantly, the model incorporated managerial strategies as mechanisms through which the trajectory could be modified. Relationship maintenance, reputation protection, boundary negotiation, professional learning, transitional employment, and strategic re-entry enabled some managers to interrupt downward movement and rebuild occupational legitimacy. Consequences therefore fed back into subsequent stages of the career process. Successful appointments accumulated additional competence, visibility, reputation, and network capital, thereby strengthening later advancement prospects; conversely, repeated dismissals, prolonged unemployment, or reputational deterioration weakened the same resources and reduced access to attractive opportunities. The final theoretical account thus portrays managerial careers in Iranian football as recursive and nonlinear. Professional success creates ladders, adverse organizational configurations create snakes, and the

position of a manager at any particular moment reflects the accumulated interaction of previous achievements, social recognition, organizational context, and adaptive responses rather than a simple linear measure of coaching ability.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study developed a grounded theory explanation of career ascent, stagnation, and decline among football managers in Iran and showed that managerial careers are not best understood as linear sequences of progressive advancement. Instead, the findings revealed a recursive and unstable process in which managers may move repeatedly between ascent, stagnation, decline, dismissal, and professional re-entry. The central phenomenon was therefore conceptualized as a dynamic "snakes-and-ladders" career pattern in which upward movement depended on the accumulation and successful conversion of professional capital, while downward movement emerged when professional resources were weakened, blocked, or devalued by adverse organizational conditions. The findings further indicated that career movement was shaped by four interrelated forms of professional capital, namely professional competence capital, professional reputation capital, relational and network capital, and adaptive career agency. These resources operated within a broader context defined by club governance, performance pressure, contractual conditions, labor-market constraints, stakeholder interference, authority-responsibility imbalance, and media and supporter expectations. Managers responded through strategies of career protection, reputation management, relationship maintenance, professional adaptation, and strategic re-entry. The consequences of this process could strengthen employability and professional legitimacy or, alternatively, produce reputational erosion, prolonged marginalization, and occupational vulnerability.

One of the most important findings was that professional competence, although essential, was not sufficient by itself to guarantee career ascent. Participants consistently described technical-tactical expertise, leadership capacity, accumulated competitive experience, and managerial knowledge as the substantive foundation of career progression, yet these qualities produced advancement only when they became visible and credible within the organizational and relational environment. This result is consistent with the concept of professional capital, according to which occupational effectiveness depends on more than individual knowledge and requires the integration of expertise, experience, judgment, and relational resources [7]. The finding is also compatible with research showing that professional experience and psychological capital improve the quality of judgment and professional decision-making in complex work environments [9]. Within football, managerial competence can therefore be interpreted as a necessary reservoir of professional resources, but the career value of those resources depends on whether club executives and other decision makers recognize them as credible indicators of future performance.

The significance of accumulated human capital in the present study also aligns with research emphasizing the importance of professional development, self-leadership, and capability renewal. Participants who continued to update tactical knowledge, leadership approaches, analytical competencies, and management practices were better positioned to sustain employability or reconstruct their careers after setbacks. This pattern is consistent with findings suggesting that self-leadership transformation can strengthen the development and performance of human capital professionals by improving proactive learning, self-management, and responsiveness to changing demands [14]. Similarly, the broader importance of human capital under uncertain conditions is supported by research demonstrating that the quality and strategic use of human capital remain critical when organizations face crisis, instability, and ethical challenges [10]. In the context of football

management, career sustainability therefore appears to depend not only on what a manager has achieved previously but also on the ability to continually renew professional capabilities in response to tactical, technological, organizational, and competitive change.

A second major finding concerned the central role of professional reputation. Participants described previous results, successful appointments, promotions, championships, visible improvement, and accumulated credibility as resources that could operate as career "ladders" by reducing the perceived risk of appointment. In contrast, repeated dismissal, prolonged unemployment, or persistent association with unsuccessful teams could gradually weaken professional legitimacy and reduce access to future opportunities. This result suggests that reputation functions as a form of symbolic professional capital through which past performance influences future employment. The finding is consistent with broader arguments concerning growth, stagnation, and decline, which emphasize that occupational trajectories often become cumulative because previous advantages create conditions for further growth, while repeated setbacks can accelerate decline [1]. The present study extends this logic to football management by showing that reputational consequences are not confined to the immediate period following success or failure; rather, they influence later appointment decisions and shape the manager's position within the labor market.

The findings also demonstrated that relational and network capital was a critical mechanism connecting competence to opportunity. Participants described relationships with club executives, agents, technical staff, former colleagues, influential players, and other actors within football as channels through which information, recommendation, visibility, and access to appointments were generated. This does not imply that relationships always replaced competence, but rather that networks frequently determined whether competence could be recognized and mobilized. This interpretation is strongly consistent with evidence showing that human capital and social capital operate jointly in influencing performance and opportunity [8]. In environments characterized by limited vacancies and strong competition, relational resources may be particularly important because they facilitate access to information before formal opportunities become widely available. However, the present findings also suggest that network capital may contribute to stagnation when managers lack access to influential relationships despite possessing adequate technical capability. The career consequences of social capital are therefore asymmetrical: strong networks can accelerate ascent or re-entry, whereas weak networks may leave competent managers professionally invisible.

Another important result was the identification of adaptive career agency as a distinct causal condition. Participants described strategic career decisions, continued learning, careful selection of appointments, temporary acceptance of lower-profile roles, and deliberate re-entry after dismissal as important mechanisms of career reconstruction. This finding aligns with research on dynamic capabilities, which emphasizes that performance under conditions of stagnation depends partly on the ability to reconfigure resources and adapt to environmental change [13]. It also corresponds with evidence that professional engagement is strengthened by psychological capital and self-efficacy, particularly when individuals must remain motivated and persistent in demanding occupational settings [11]. Psychological capital has likewise been associated with professional commitment and reduced burnout, indicating that resilience, hope, and confidence may help individuals sustain professional functioning under pressure [12]. In football management, adaptive career agency may therefore represent the behavioral expression of these psychological and professional resources. Managers who interpret dismissal as a temporary

disruption and respond by learning, networking, repositioning, and selecting new opportunities may be more capable of reversing decline than those who become passive during prolonged unemployment.

The contextual findings were equally significant. Club governance and executive structure emerged as major determinants of whether professional capital could be translated into sustained career advancement. Stable leadership, clear strategic direction, and consistent evaluation enabled managers to work within predictable boundaries and develop longer-term performance systems. In contrast, executive turnover and fragmented decision-making increased uncertainty and could undermine managerial continuity independently of technical competence. This result is consistent with research on organizational stagnation and inertia, which shows that rigid structures and maladaptive organizational routines can restrict development even when individuals possess adequate capabilities [2]. Organizational inertia may prevent professional resources from being used effectively because employees or managers remain embedded in structures that resist learning, change, or transparent evaluation. Similar conclusions can be drawn from research on technological stagnation, which emphasizes that organizational systems must adapt continuously to avoid performance decline [5]. In football clubs, repeated replacement of managers without reforming governance structures may therefore reproduce instability instead of addressing its underlying causes.

Short-term result orientation represented another major contextual condition. Participants described environments in which a brief sequence of poor results could radically change perceptions of a manager and precipitate dismissal, even when contextual limitations constrained performance. This finding reflects the broader problem of stagnation and innovation failure identified in organizational research. Systems that rely on narrow or inflexible evaluation practices may suppress experimentation, learning, and longer-term development [6]. The present study suggests that a comparable mechanism may operate in football when evaluation is dominated by immediate match outcomes. When managers are assessed almost exclusively through short-term results, they may have little opportunity to implement developmental strategies, introduce new tactical systems, or build organizational stability. The career consequence is an increased probability of abrupt movement from ascent to decline, reinforcing the nonlinear character of managerial careers.

Employment insecurity and labor-market scarcity further intensified this process. Participants described short contracts, uncertain tenure, high substitutability, and a limited number of prestigious positions as conditions that increased managerial vulnerability. These findings are compatible with the wider understanding of stagnation as a structurally produced phenomenon. At the macro level, growth and stagnation are shaped by changes in opportunity structures, resource allocation, and the capacity of systems to adapt to changing conditions [16]. Although the scale of analysis differs, a similar principle applies to football management: the availability of positions and the rules governing access to them constrain the extent to which individual professional capital can generate advancement. Career stagnation may therefore occur even among capable managers when the labor market is crowded, organizational turnover is erratic, and appointment decisions are concentrated among a relatively small group of institutional actors.

Intervening conditions further clarified why career outcomes could diverge among managers with similar levels of competence. Informal influence, stakeholder pressure, and executive interference were repeatedly described as factors that could restrict managerial autonomy. The findings indicated that some managers were held accountable for outcomes while lacking full control over squad selection, recruitment, staffing, or strategic decisions. This authority-responsibility imbalance created a particularly vulnerable career position because poor results could be attributed to the manager even when

substantial determinants of performance lay outside the manager's control. This finding resonates with research on professional-organizational conflict, which demonstrates that organizational adaptability and institutional arrangements can alter the effects of individual professional orientations on workplace outcomes [15]. In football, the discrepancy between formal responsibility and actual authority can produce both performance problems and reputational damage, thereby contributing to decline through mechanisms that are organizational rather than purely personal.

Media and supporter pressure also operated as amplifying conditions. Participants indicated that negative public narratives could intensify organizational pressure and shorten the period within which managers were expected to demonstrate improvement. This finding helps explain how career decline can become self-reinforcing. Once unfavorable results are publicly framed as evidence of managerial failure, club executives may perceive continued employment as increasingly risky, while future employers may interpret dismissal as a signal of reduced competence. The broader literature on professional stagnation similarly suggests that career outcomes are influenced by social interpretation as well as objective performance conditions [4]. In this sense, football managerial careers are partly constructed through narratives of success and failure circulated among organizational actors, supporters, and the media.

The strategic findings showed that managers attempted to influence these processes through career protection and professional adaptation. Relationship maintenance, reputation protection, negotiation of organizational boundaries, professional learning, and transitional employment all functioned as mechanisms for preserving or rebuilding career capital. These findings are consistent with studies emphasizing that professional engagement and adaptive functioning depend partly on psychological resources and self-efficacy [11], while dynamic capability research similarly highlights the importance of reconfiguration under unfavorable environmental conditions [13]. The present study adds that strategic repositioning may sometimes require accepting a role that appears less prestigious in the short term. Such a move may function as an intentional career reconstruction strategy if it restores visibility, generates recent performance evidence, and reconnects the manager with employment networks. This distinction between uncontrolled decline and strategic temporary repositioning is theoretically important because not every downward occupational move should be interpreted as career failure.

Overall, the findings suggest that football managerial careers are produced through continuous interaction between professional capital and organizational opportunity. The resulting model explains why similar managers may experience different trajectories and why the same manager may move repeatedly between advancement, stagnation, dismissal, and recovery. It also clarifies why stagnation cannot be explained solely by declining competence and why ascent cannot be attributed solely to superior ability. Professional success emerges when competence, reputation, relational resources, adaptability, and favorable organizational conditions align; decline becomes more likely when these resources are weakened or when organizational structures prevent them from being translated into performance and recognition. The findings therefore support a processual understanding of career development that is compatible with research on organizational inertia, professional capital, psychological capital, social capital, human capital, and adaptability [3, 7, 9, 10]. The grounded theory developed in this study extends these perspectives by integrating them into a single explanation of nonlinear career movement in football management.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved 15 current or former football managers and therefore sought theoretical depth rather than statistical representativeness. Although the sample included variation in gender, competitive level, employment status, and professional experience, some segments of Iranian

football management may not have been represented sufficiently. Second, the findings were based primarily on retrospective self-reports, meaning that participants' accounts may have been influenced by memory, personal interpretation, reputational concerns, or post hoc reconstruction of career events. Third, organizational actors such as club executives, agents, federation officials, players, and media representatives were not included as parallel participant groups, so the model primarily reflects managers' interpretations of career processes. Fourth, some organizational events described in interviews could not be independently verified, and the study therefore distinguishes participants' accounts from externally confirmed facts. Finally, because the study focused on Iranian football, institutional, cultural, economic, and governance conditions specific to this context may limit direct transferability to other national football systems.

Future research should test and extend the proposed grounded theory across broader and more diverse settings. Comparative qualitative studies could examine whether the same career mechanisms operate among managers in different countries, leagues, genders, competitive levels, and ownership structures. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable because it could follow managers prospectively across appointments, dismissals, unemployment, and re-entry rather than relying primarily on retrospective accounts. Future studies could also incorporate multiple stakeholder perspectives by interviewing club executives, technical directors, agents, players, federation officials, and sports journalists to determine where interpretations converge or diverge. Quantitative research could subsequently operationalize key constructs identified in the present model, including professional capital, network capital, managerial autonomy, organizational instability, reputation, and career adaptability, and examine their relationships with objective indicators of career mobility. Social network analysis could also clarify how relational position affects access to managerial opportunities, while comparative case studies could investigate why some managers recover successfully after dismissal and others experience prolonged occupational decline.

From a practical perspective, football clubs and governing bodies should develop more transparent and structured systems for managerial appointment, evaluation, and dismissal. Clubs should clarify the relationship between authority and responsibility before appointments are finalized and ensure that managers are not held fully accountable for areas over which they have little operational control. Evaluation systems should combine short-term competitive results with broader indicators such as squad development, tactical progress, organizational stability, player development, and achievement relative to available resources. Managers themselves should treat professional capital as a portfolio requiring continuous renewal through learning, leadership development, technological competence, network maintenance, and reputation management. Professional associations and football federations could support this process through career-development programs, mentoring, post-dismissal support, and more transparent employment networks. Such practices may reduce avoidable career stagnation, improve organizational continuity, and increase the likelihood that managerial appointments reflect sustained professional competence rather than short-term pressure or informal influence alone.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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