



## The relationship between learning satisfaction and career competencies



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### ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore the relationship among experiential learning, learning satisfaction, and career competencies. Data were collected based on semi-structured questionnaires, and structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to examine the proposed relationships. The findings indicated that there was a positive relationship between experiential learning and learning satisfaction, and learning satisfaction contributed positively to career competencies. The increase of learning satisfaction may enhance the three forms of career competencies—knowing-why, knowing-whom, and knowing-how. This study may provide useful guidance to young talents' career development and practical human management activities.

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### 1. Introduction

Nowadays in China, the market main labor force is Generation Y, people who were born between 1980 and 1994. Despite the reputation of fickle, self-focused and transient individuals, they are highly educated, ambitious and career-oriented (Dinnell, 2007). There are eight main characteristics shown by Generation Y toward their careers, which include self-reliant and independent, techno savvy, entrepreneurial, seeking flexibility, having an urgent sense of immediacy, wanting increasing responsibility, having a “get off my back” attitude and adopting a free agency attitude (Martin, 2005). According to a survey report in 2008, the three most important job considerations of Generation Y employees are salary, benefits, and opportunities for career growth and advancement. That is, in addition to compensation, career is one of the most important motivation factors for young talents. It is therefore important for human resources managers to care more on young talents' career development and provide necessary training to enhance their career competencies.

Nowadays, the dynamic working environment and flatter organizations have revolutionized the career model and the way of people managing their careers. Individuals are now expected to navigate their own careers and lifelong learning opportunities (Hall, 2003; Patton and McMahon, 2001). In line with the need

for career self-management is the increased emphasis on the personal qualities that are required for successful career management. Given the trend toward less stable career patterns, individuals who are successful are those who are able to achieve desired career progress by enhancing their career competencies (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994; Eby et al., 2003). Thus, career competencies have become increasingly important for Generation Y employees.

Career competencies are typified in people's beliefs and identities, skills and knowledge, and networks of relationships and contacts (Arthur et al., 1995). According to Arthur et al. (1995), personal competencies reflect different forms of knowing, and that intelligent careers reflect the application of these forms of knowing. Career competencies include three components, namely, knowing-why, knowing-whom, and knowing-how.

The knowing-why competency answers the question ‘why’ as it relates to career motivation, personal meaning, and identification (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). This competency is associated with one's motivational energy to understand oneself, explore different possibilities, and adapt to ever-changing work situations (Arthur et al., 1999). The knowing-whom competency concerns career-relevant networks and contacts (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994, p. 309). Knowing-whom contacts include relevant relationships inside and outside an organization, such as bosses, peers, and consultants, as well as professional and social acquaintances (Inkson and Arthur, 2001). The knowing-how competency reflects career-relevant skills and job-related knowledge that accumulate over time and contribute to both the organization's and the individual's knowledge base (Arthur et al., 1999; DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994).

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To enhance career competencies, tailor-made mentoring and training methods are essential to cater to the new work force. This is because the Generation Y seek more personal attention, require high levels of supervision, and expect more structure than their Generation X predecessors (Zemke et al., 2000). Serving as a bridge between academic teaching and practical learning, experiential learning is thus important for Generation Y employees. Experiential learning refers to the process of learning from experience (Dewey and Dewey, 1915; Dewey, 1938). It is an educational process from meaningless to significant, with the aim of gaining practical working experience (Jirasek, 2004).

To stay marketable, young talents expect lifelong learning and on-the-job training (Alch, 2000), and they also hope to proactively plan their own careers and professional development (Westerman and Yamamura, 2007). Although many studies have discussed learning and training of young employees, most focused on the learning emotion (Abe, 2011), learning style (Cannice, 2013; Manolis et al., 2013), learning environment (Bodnera et al., 2013), and professional skills (Dobos, 2014), there is limited research exploring the relationship between their learning and career development. This study, therefore, aims to explore how to enhance young talents' career competencies, and what kinds of training or teaching activities are effective to increase their learning satisfaction and career competencies.

Kolb and Kolb (2006) state that experiential learning is an effective educational approach, it is effective in increasing individuals' meta-cognitive abilities, enhancing their ability to apply information to actual situations. Experiential learning promotes greater interest in the subject material, enhances satisfaction, positive attitudes and independent learning, and promotes a range of generic skills that include interpersonal, analytical, problem-solving and critical thinking (Snyder, 2003). Ultimately, learning experientially instills individuals the ability to apply learned concepts to real-world experiences that individuals may face in their professional careers. The studies of Kolb and Kolb (2006), and Snyder (2003) provide theoretical foundation for this study.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. *The relationship between experiential learning and learning satisfaction*

Learning satisfaction refers to the learners' perception or attitude toward the learning activities (Tough, 1982), it indicates the learners' positive feelings or attitude toward the teaching programs. There are many factors influencing learning satisfaction, such as learning style, teaching methods, self-development, and university environment (Aldemir and Gulcan, 2004; Fredericksen et al., 2000).

Of all the factors, teaching and learning methods are crucial factors contributing to learning satisfaction (Gurpinar et al., 2010). It has been found that people's learning satisfaction increased if the teaching methods meet their interests and needs (Abdous and Yen, 2010; Lam and Wong, 1974). Learners can enhance their learning experience and better reflect and absorb the knowledge by experiential learning activities (Martin et al., 2000). People learn best by doing, and this is consistent with Generation Y's learning motivation. A survey indicated that Generation Y aspired for clear directions and management assistance for tasks, while expecting freedom to get the job done via empowerment (Morton, 2002). Young talents are likely to perform best when their abilities are identified and matched with challenging work that encourages them to reach their full potential (Martin and Tulgan, 2006). Thus, individuals who involve in the activities would be more satisfied with their study than those who were not participated. For

example, practice-oriented education and internship may influence individuals' learning satisfaction, because learners can acquire the employability skills in the workplace environment (Aldemir and Gulcan, 2004). Based on the foregoing discussion, it is predicted that:

**H1.** Experiential learning may have a positive effect on learning satisfaction.

### 2.2. *The relationship between learning satisfaction and knowing-why career competency*

The career competencies included three forms, namely, knowing-why, knowing-whom, and knowing-how competencies (Arthur et al., 1995). The 'knowing-why' competency is associated with one's motivational energy to understand oneself, explore different possibilities, and adapt to ever-changing work situations (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). It included three variables—career insight, proactive personality, and openness to experience (Eby et al., 2003). The first, career insight, captures the extent to which one has realistic career expectations, knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses, and specific career goals. The second, proactive personality, refers to a dispositional tendency toward proactive behavior. The third, openness to experience, is related being imaginative, curious, broad-minded, and active. People with this trait also seek out new experiences and are willing to acquire new ideas.

Learning satisfaction indicates the learners' positive feelings or attitude toward the teaching programs. These feelings are intrinsic in the individual learners, and are associated with particular behaviors driven by extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1975). Motivation to learn may lead to positive personal outcomes, such as the enhancement of performance and competency (Ismail et al., 2009). Awareness of satisfaction drives intrinsic motivation affect, and leads to goal selection and goal-directed behaviors (Bradford, 2011; Deci, 1975). This may encourage individuals to persist in pursuing career goals even if they are confronted by obstacles and setbacks. It has been found that experiential learning promotes greater interest in the subject material, enhances satisfaction, and in turn promotes a range of generic skills that include interpersonal, analytical, problem-solving and critical thinking (Brickner and Etter, 2008; Snyder, 2003). Satisfaction may also intrinsically related to feelings of competence and self-determination (Deci, 1975), which help individuals to be well aware of their strengths and weakness and set up practical career goal. Furthermore, the function of learning satisfaction also reflects ongoing behavior changes (Deci, 1975; Song and Keller, 2001). Thus, learning satisfaction may motivate learners to identify opportunities, acquire new ideas, and adjust their career goal in a dynamic environment. It is thus predicted that:

**H2.** Learning satisfaction may have a positive effect on knowing-why career competency.

### 2.3. *The relationship between learning satisfaction and knowing-whom career competency*

The 'knowing whom' competency concerns career-relevant networks and contacts. It includes relevant relationships inside and outside an organization, and mentoring relationships. It has been proved that learning satisfaction was positively related to improved interaction (Dziuban et al., 2007b). That is, when learners are satisfied with their learning, they may create interactive ways of communication (Yengin et al., 2011), which help them to build networks with each other. Furthermore, learning satisfaction and effective teaching activities contributed positively to learners' teamwork satisfaction and collaborative learning. It has been found that Gen Y exhibited the propensity for working in teams

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