



Professional vitality and career success: Mediation, age and outcomes



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ABSTRACT

We propose a model that explains the complex phenomenon of successful career at work, and focuses on the antecedents of professional vitality at the workplace. The model sheds light on the role of professional vitality as an essential ingredient for successful careers. Using a survey design, we tested our model with a sample of 545 managers and professionals. The findings suggest effects of career attitudes on career outcomes, mediated by professional vitality. The relationship between professional vitality and age at work environment forms an inverse U shape curve, peaking at age of fifties, an optimistic note for the global aging workforce.

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1. Introduction

Work is central for the lives of many people. For some it gives the meaning to their existence and identity (Forest, Mageau, Sarrazin, & Morin, 2011; Kram, Wasserman, & Yip, 2012; Vallerand & Houliort, 2003). Work is important for people's subjective well being and can be related to a host of benefits for the employees and the firm (Russell, 2008). Subjective well being refers to people's perceptions of their existence or their subjective view of their life experience; it represents people's cognitive and affective evaluations of their life and expresses an ongoing state of psychological wellness (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002). One of indicators of subjective well being is subjective vitality, where vitality represents positive feelings of aliveness, spirit and energy (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Palmer, Dankoski, Smith, Brutkiewicz, and Bogdewic (2011) see professional vitality as a synergy between high satisfaction, productivity and engagement that allows faculty members to maximize professional success and achieve goals following institutional goals – a definition that can be adapted to different professional domains.

A related construct to subjective vitality is vigor, where vigor refers to an individual's feeling of physical strength – emotional energy and cognitive liveliness (Shirom, 2011). Additional constructs close to vitality in the work context are thriving and zest. Thriving at work consist learning and sense of vitality (Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2011). Zest is a positive feature reflecting an individual's approach to life with anticipation, energy and excitement in which in the work context is highly correlated

with work satisfaction and life satisfaction (Peterson, Park, Hall, & Seligman, 2009).

Vitality in work is an important phenomenon, due to its associations with several organizational outcomes: safety, organization values, organizational commitment (DeJoy, Della, Vandenberg, & Wilson, 2010); job performance (Carmeli, 2009); innovation (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009); creativity (Kark & Carmeli, 2009); possible burnout (Vallerand, Paquet, Philippe, & Charest, 2010), and agility (Dries, Vantilborgh, & Pepermans, 2012). Following Fritz, Lam, and Spreitzer (2011), it is an important phenomenon because workers' energy is the “fuel” that enables successful operations and promotes performance in organizations (Dutton, 2003).

We contend, that in a similar way that the metaphorical “fuel perspective” of vitality at work is related to successful organizational operations, professional vitality can also serve as the “fuel” for a successful career. We are particularly interested in how professional vitality is related to career success measures, like position in organizational hierarchy, career satisfaction, life satisfaction and work withdrawal. In addition we explore the potential mediation phenomenon of professional vitality. We are also interested how professional vitality is related to age, especially at both early and late career stages. Due to the aging workforce around the world (Greller & Stroh, 2004), we look also at how long professional vitality lasts, in particular bearing in mind the difficulties people experience in forced retirement (Kets de Vries, 2003). The paper presents professional vitality, then introduces the conceptual framework of the research, followed by hypothesis development for the model – based on the antecedents (in career context) to professional vitality, the mediation of professional vitality and the outcomes (career success aspects). We discuss the theoretical, managerial and worker implications, ending with the research's strengths and limitations.

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2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

The construct ‘professional vitality’ was introduced to the literature by Harvey (2002) who studied the vitality of school principals in the United States. Professional vitality is a multidimensional feature and is defined as “a characteristic possessed by individuals who are able to consistently perform the work of their chosen profession with passion, vigor, facility and satisfaction” (Harvey, 2002, p. 28). Where the central component of professional vitality is passion at work, for Harvey, passion is “a compelling inner desire to enhance the lives of children/students through one’s own contributions as an educational leader” (Harvey, 2002, p. 29) – a definition that can be adapted to different professions and organizational settings. Harvey’s (2002) concept of passion is very similar to Vallerand et al. (2003) and Vallerand (2010) definition of passion as a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, find important and in which they invest significant time and energy.

Vigor is defined as “energy of actions and is enacted largely out of passion to make a difference. This energy of vigor takes the form of mental, physical and emotional exertion demonstrated by school leaders in the performance of their jobs” (Harvey, 2002, p. 32). This definition is similar to Shirom’s (2011, p. 50) definition as “individuals’ feelings that they possess physical strength, emotional energy and cognitive liveliness, and represents a moderate-intensity affect experienced at work.”

Facility as defined by Harvey (2002, p. 35) is “the ability to effectively harness the energy of one’s passion into actions that display the savvy and confidence of craftsman.” Harvey notes that the facility or skill acquired throughout a principal’s career serves to enhance performance and contributes to comprehensive professional vitality. This is a feature that we contend can be applied to any profession. In similar line of thinking as Harvey (2002), we posit that vital professionals at work can apply their skills in stressful situations and environments and carry out their work with the confidence that they have the capabilities and knowledge to carry out successfully their jobs. The last dimension of professional vitality is job satisfaction.

We developed our conceptual framework on current career theory (Arthur, 2008; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) which emphasizes subjective well being aspects of career success, combined with Hobfoll’s (1989), Hobfoll’s (2002) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. COR theory reflects reactions of people to stressful situations and the way they handle these events, and is based on resources available to them to cope with stressful situations (Glavin & Schieman, 2012; Walsh, 2011). Due to the fact that the work environment is a stressful surrounding, e. g in Europe 28% of the employees noted their work as ‘very stressful’ and in USA the figure was 26–40% (Sonnetag & Frese, 2003), we expect that COR framework will add additional insights on the career success subject.

One of main principles of COR theory is that people attain and manage resources that they highly regard and value. Individuals aim to maximize resources that mostly contribute to their general development. Previous work on well-being, job satisfaction, and burnout has successfully supported the COR model (Halbesleben, 2006; Wright & Bonett, 2007), thus, we employ this theory to study career success by looking at the subjective aspects of career success like professional vitality and career satisfaction in dynamic work environments.

Stress is created when people experience threat or actually lose valuable resources. Resources are ‘... those objects (e.g. car, house), conditions (e.g. job security, good marriage), personal characteristics (e.g. social aplomb, mastery), or energies (e.g. money, knowledge, favors owed) that are valued by the individual or that serve as means of obtaining that which is valued by the

individual’ (Hobfoll, Freedy, Lane, & Geller, 1990, p. 466). Hobfoll (2002) claims that people with higher levels of resources will handle stressful situations and resolve problems better than people with lower levels of resources. Resources enable individuals to manage challenges and take advantage of opportunities (Hobfoll, 2002; Wright & Bonett, 2007). Within the work world, an employee’s resources can be the physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects of the work role or institutional resources (Zeitz, Blau, & Fertig, 2009). Employees will invest efforts and energy in order to meet work requirements and achieve desirable results (Cheung & Tang, 2007). There is no single ‘best practice’ to manage resources, and people differ in their ability to do so (Hochwarter, Perrewe, Meurs, & Kacmar, 2007). Employees can apply different level of efforts, utilize different organizational outfits or assistance (Hochwarter, Laird, & Brouer, 2008). COR framework can also explain employees performance in the aspects of in role performance, creativity and implementation of new ideas (Ng & Feldman, 2012).

The COR literature does not discuss how resources can be a factor in career development and progress, where resources may be instrumental. For example, employees may gather and look for any additional resources within the organization in order to compensate for the erosion of resources in daily organizational activities (Hobfoll, 2011).

Employees manage their resources in a way such that some of their overall resources will contribute to their general growth (Wright & Bonett, 2007). Higher job demands require greater amounts of resources, and may thus divert these resources away from career progression. Increased resources would enable better coping with job demands (Hobfoll, 2011), and would probably allow for the diversion of resources to enhance career progress and improve well being. Under theories of contemporary careers, which are person oriented and driven by inner values (Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006) and as inner personal values affect the selection of resources in order to cope with different situations (Hobfoll, 2002; Morelli & Cunningham, 2012). We have focused on personal resources that are career related, so employees can apply them in order to enhance their subjective well being and success at work. For example, drawing energy from personal attitude for career or career commitment may mean adding efforts and time beyond the period dedicated to current tasks, and increasing the devotion applied to career development.

The model depicting the antecedents (resources) based on internal employees resources, which are related to the professional vitality, appears in Fig. 1.

2.1. Antecedents of professional vitality

2.1.1. Protean career attitude

Protean career attitude (Prot A) is based on inner values (Hall, 2002), which are a powerful drive for an individual’s behavior (Rokeach, 1973; Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000). The importance of this career attitude was reiterated more recently (Briscoe et al., 2006), and was associated with different aspects of career success (Baruch & Quick, 2007), though the impact may be different for external versus internal success (Singh, Ragins, & Tharenou, 2009). Based on inner values, employees can derive additional energy and compensate for resource erosion following work activities. This additional power maybe applied to career path development, activities or toward an individual’s well being.

2.1.2. Career commitment (CC)

Career commitment is defined as “one’s attitude towards one’s profession or vocation” (Blau, 1985, p. 278) or “one’s motivation to work in chosen vocation” (Carson & Bedeian, 1994, p. 240). Following the work of Lapointe, Vanderberghe and Panaccio (2011) on

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