



The career impact of winning an external work-related award



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ABSTRACT

There is an abundance of work-related external awards in the business and corporate sectors. This study examines the impact of awards given to individuals in the business sector. Careers and signalling theory were used to initiate research in this domain with 32 interviews with winners of national work-related awards. The majority of winners were either nominated for the awards by others or encouraged to nominate by their managers, which may reflect an organisational, rather than individual, signal for distinction. Results demonstrated that all winners valued the recognition they received from their award win but in an unexpected finding, no significant career trajectory changes occurred. Award winners used their award as a signal of their excellence to distinguish themselves from others. The award gave them confidence and credibility. There was no relationship between winning an award and career success measures such as promotions or salary increases. Counterintuitive negative impacts identified by award winners are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Awards are ubiquitous. Awards for outstanding performance may be made by governments, monarchies and organisations (Frey, 2006) and the number of awarding bodies and awards is increasing (Best, 2008). Awards may be referred to as a decoration, medal, prize, grant, honour, knighthood or damehood, certificate, trophy, world record, an Order or championship. Industries well known for their awards include advertising, arts, film, food, literature, music, science, and television. These awards may be bestowed upon an organisation, team or individual. Awards may recognise a single event or an enduring activity and may even be bestowed posthumously. These awards are well known and the nomination, judging and celebration of these awards are transparent or else generally accepted (Duguid, 2007).

Beyond these global high-profile awards are hundreds of business awards granted each year to individuals in their regular work activities. Individuals often refer to awards won in their resumes and on websites like LinkedIn in order to distinguish themselves from others. These awards for individuals may be seen as a means to signal (Gemser & Wijnberg, 2002) an individual's skills and abilities to recruiters and hiring managers.

Little is known about these industry-specific business awards and the impact of winning a work-related award on the progress of an individual's career. Given the effort that is invested into selecting, nominating and preparing for awards, research into the benefits of nominating for an award is overdue. An investigation into the benefits to the career of the individual award recipient is the focus of this study. As a basis for understanding career progression, a review of the literature on career theory including traditional, boundary-less, protean and contemporary career theories is presented. The literature on awards, dominated by the Nobel Prize, Academy Awards, book, food and academic prizes is then described. The role of awards as a signalling mechanism (Spence, 1973) to indicate excellence and expertise in the business awards context is examined. The interview study of 32 award winners is then described and the results are discussed.

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1.1. Careers literature

Career theories range from the traditional structured “sequence of positions” (Super & Hall, 1978, p. 334) through the course of a lifetime (Super, 1957) to the contemporary views that include non-traditional paths such as protean and boundaryless careers (Baruch, 2006). Advances in career frameworks (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) include hybrid careers that respond to recent economic and demographic trends.

Much of the career research is influenced by the work of Super (1957, 1975, 1980, 1990) and Super & Hall (1978) with early work focusing on the career as a sequence of life roles with different career behaviours or developmental tasks. The traditional concept of career development focused on a sequence of jobs that ascend through an organisation's hierarchy together with increased remuneration, responsibility and recognition (Super, 1957). Career stages like organisational entry, establishment, advancement, middle and late career are identified by Super and Hall (1978). More recently, Super (1990) suggested the timing of transitions between these stages may be a result of the individual's personality and life circumstances rather than life stages.

Attention in the last twenty years has shifted from long-standing career relationships to careers as more temporary transactional relationships between the individual and the organisation (Baruch, 2004). Boundaryless careers may be the opposite of organisational careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) as boundaryless careers are not fixed within the boundaries of a single organisation, do not have an ordered progression and have less stability (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Boundaryless careers may be adopted willingly (Zeitl, Blau, & Fertig, 2009) or workers may be forced into adopting a boundaryless attitude as organisations adapt to their fast changing environments (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994).

Protean careers, in contrast, are careers that are owned by the individual and change regularly, depending on the situation and the individual and requiring rapid adaptation and transformation (Hall, 1996). A protean career differs from the traditional career by having less focus on the vertical climb up the corporate ladder that defines success. Instead, a protean career has a focus on the individual as the one experiencing the change (Baruch, 2004) and on psychological success that results from achieving important life goals (Hall, 1996). Protean careers include learning stages (Hall, 1996) rather than only age-related stages (Super, 1990). The protean career is considered a “mindset about the career” (Briscoe & Hall, 2006, p. 6) rather than a particular behaviour. There are significant overlaps between protean and boundaryless career concepts (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Sullivan and Baruch (2009) demonstrate “integrative frameworks” (p. 1554) combining boundaryless and protean, traditional and non-traditional career concepts. These hybrid models combine elements of both traditional and non-traditional concepts (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). A key distinction in the careers literature is the difference between linear and non-linear careers (Heslin, 2005). A linear career follows progressive steps upwards to positions of greater organisational authority and has been labelled a ‘climber’ career type (Sturges, 1999). Super's career theories are examples of linear careers. For those with linear careers, career success is often determined by the position held within an organisation's hierarchy, symbols of success and power over others (Brousseau, Driver, Eneroth, & Larsson, 1996). In contrast, non-linear careers theories include boundaryless and protean careers (Hall, 1996). For those with non-linear careers, career success is often determined by the individual's personal vision and values including personal growth, creativity and independence (Brousseau et al., 1996).

In these career theories, the winning of an award may impact an individual's career by being an external change or as a change in the individual's circumstances. Examples of external elements that impact a career might include human resources practices (Jansen, van der Velde, & Telting, 2001), the organisational climate for learning (Park & Rothwell, 2009) and person–environment fit (Ballout, 2007). Other factors that impact career development include age, (Van der Heijden, de Lange, Demerouti, & Van der Heijde, 2009), education and training (Judge, Klinger, & Simon, 2010) and networking efforts (Ismail & Rasdi, 2007).

Despite the trend towards newer forms of career orientation and the potential signal of performance excellence that an award win is likely to bring, there is limited evidence of career theory addressing the impact of a work-related award. In the field of cultural production (literature, film, art, music) the conceptualisation of cultural prizes as promotions within the career context have been addressed (for example Baker and Faulkner (1991), Faulkner and Anderson (1987), and Lincoln (2007)). Nobel prizes as the pinnacle of achievement in scientific advancement are identified as a career-relevant event with respect to career trajectory resulting from earlier labour and affecting future effort (Inhaber & Przednowek, 1976; Merton, 1968). In education, the role of grants as a career stimulating event in an academic's development has been examined (for example, Dinham & Scott, 2002). Beyond these studies, research on the impact of individual awards in business has yet to be addressed. To understand awards and their possible influence on an individual's career, the next section presents relevant literature on awards.

1.2. Awards literature

Individuals have an innate desire to distinguish themselves from other individuals, an urge to be better than others (Frey, 2005). Winning an award may lead to fame, prestige, power or wealth (Gehrlein & Kher, 2004) and considerable literature exists on high profile awards and prizes such as the Nobel Prize. The Nobel Prize was created for achievements in chemistry, peace, physics, physiology and literature. The first Nobel Prize was awarded in 1901 (Pederson, 2006) and most categories are awarded annually. In a closed process, nominees and prize winners are decided by the awarding authority committee members (Lindbeck, 1985). Winners in each category receive a substantial cash prize. The prize may be won by an individual or may be shared. The Nobel Prize has attracted much research attention, including the effect of gender (Beard, 2001), the merit of winning (Adams & Raymond, 2008) and the merit of not winning (Ballantyne, 2008; Moore & Savage, 2009; Ranzan, 2009; Stolt, 2001). Being a Nobel Prize winner has been said to increase longevity (Rablen & Oswald, 2008).

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