



A longitudinal study of career success, embeddedness, and mobility of early career professionals



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ABSTRACT

The study of voluntary job mobility has traditionally focused on how the present context and individual factors either support or constrain choice of blue and white collar workers. Less attention has been devoted to the relationships among career success, embeddedness, and mobility of early career professionals. How do past career success and job mobility affect job embeddedness, subsequent career success, and future mobility within and between organizations and occupations? Each of these constructs is often studied as a dependent variable, yet the relationships among them, over time, are rarely examined. We explore the effects of past objective career actions (promotions, % salary change, and job mobility) on current job embeddedness and subjective career success, and on job, organizational, and occupational mobility one year later. Results support the positive influence of past promotions, % salary change, and current job embeddedness on subjective career success, and a negative influence for past promotions, job embeddedness, and subjective career success on mobility one year later as people began to 'settle in'. We also observed small positive relationships of past promotions and % salary change with job embeddedness, and of past job mobility with future mobility – indicating that objective career success contributes to embeddedness, yet those that move more often tend to keep doing so. There were no differences or interaction effects based on gender or years of work experience. We found significantly stronger negative relationships of embeddedness and subjective career success with mobility between occupations than for mobility within organizations. However, the same pattern of findings was observed for job, organization, and occupational mobility.

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Career success, the accumulated positive objective and psychological outcomes resulting from work experiences, is of interest to both individuals and organizations (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000; Hall, 1976, 2002). In periods of economic and organizational stability, these interests tend to align – employee development, salary increases, and promotions generally reflect positive outcomes for individuals (rewards) and organizations (retention of desired talent) (Ng, Sorensen, Eby, & Feldman, 2007). With the shift in job and career landscapes over the past four decades (Kirchmeyer, 2006; Littler, Wiesner, & Dunford, 2003; Sullivan, 1999), the concept of a boundaryless career has been advanced and supported (Arthur, 1994). Through job changes, including moves across organizational and occupational boundaries, individuals progress in their careers (Hall, 2002; Rosenbaum, 1984). While job mobility can be involuntary, reflecting organizational needs, voluntary mobility involves individuals proactively managing their careers and shifts the balance of benefits to the individual (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003; Hall, 1996; Lam, Ng, & Feldman, 2012; Ng et al., 2007; Tymon, Stumpf, & Doh, 2010). Voluntary job, organizational and occupational mobility that is good for the individual is often a turnover problem for the organization (Feldman & Ng, 2007; Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). While job mobility is associated

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with objective career success (salary, promotions) (Lam et al., 2012), there are benefits of career stability for subjective career success including greater career satisfaction, increasing human capital, and more positive core self evaluations (Feldman, 2002; Judge & Hurst, 2008; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005).

Feldman and Ng (2007) argue that to understand career mobility and stability (retention), we should be examining how job, organizational, and occupational embeddedness affect subjective career success, objective career success, and future voluntary mobility. In essence they are pursuing the argument Staw and Oldham (1978) made regarding a need for human resource researchers and practitioners to overcome a tendency to focus on one dependent variable, and in so doing, focus on the relationships among several important outcomes over time.

In this study, we explore how past career success (promotions, salary changes, and voluntary mobility) of early career professionals influences their: (1) job embeddedness, (2) subjective career success, and (3) future mobility. Career theorists suggest that there may be important differences in the effects of voluntary mobility when limited to within-company moves in an occupational area as compared with mobility between organizations and occupations (Greenhaus et al., 2000; Hall, 1996; Super, 1980). In general, more limited moves contribute less to career success than moves involving new organizations and occupations because the latter involve voluntary disruptions which stimulate growth and a positive sense of control and well-being. Based on Feldman and Ng (2007), we examine voluntary mobility in ways which capture the magnitude of the likely disruption associated with a move, i.e., as a measure incorporating lateral vs. advancement, within vs. between organizations, and within vs. across occupations, and as three contrasts — no change vs. job change, no change vs. organizational change, and no change vs. occupational change.

1. Conceptual background

1.1. Objective and subjective career success

Objective career success typically uses external, often unobtrusive indicators of advancement or rewards — such as promotions, salary change, highest salary, hierarchical level, level of education, and professional honors (Judge & Hurst, 2008; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). Subjective career success has focused on a person's experience of their career relying on measures of career satisfaction, commitment, well being, and psychological success (Burke, 2001; Hall, 2002; Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995). Subjective career success reflects the affect associated with the accumulated experiences of their work life (Srivastava, Locke, Judge, & Adams, 2010). Job satisfaction, which is more associated with their current work, can be viewed as one component of satisfaction with their career (Erdogan & Bauer, 2005).

Support for a positive relationship of objective and subjective career success is based on attribution theory (Johns, 1999) — promotions and salary increases are attributed to internal causes engendering positive self perceptions and affect (Stumpf & Tymon, 2012). Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) further suggests that promotions and salary level relative to others may lead to an enhanced self perception and greater feelings of career success. Both theories consider the objective career success outcomes of promotions and salary change as causes of subjective career success.

In a meta-analysis of predictors of career success, Ng et al. (2005: 375) hypothesize that “Objective and subjective career success are positively related yet empirically distinct.” Two objective career success measures reviewed by them were salary and promotions; career satisfaction was the only subjective measure. The correlation of salary to career satisfaction was .30 (a sample-size-weighted correlation across 23 studies and 10,903 people). The correlation of promotion to career satisfaction was .22 (12 studies, 8701 people). When examining additional aspects of subjective career success in a causal framework, Stumpf and Tymon (2012) found that past promotions predicted three measures of subjective career success — human capital, core self-evaluations, and satisfaction with their career; past salary change predicted human capital.

Hypothesis 1. More promotions and greater salary change are associated with greater subjective career success.

1.2. Job mobility and subjective career success

Increasing job mobility, individuals changing jobs within and between organizations, is consistent with their pursuing a self-directed protean (Hall, 1976) or boundaryless careers (Arthur, 1994; Briscoe, Henagan, Burton, & Murphy, 2012). Individuals use their mobility to advance their success. In forecasting job mobility using the US Department of Labor statistics, it is projected that early career workers will have 10–14 jobs over the next 20 years, that 25% of these workers will be with an employer less than 1 year; and 50% will be there less than 5 years (Floch, Mclood, & Bronman, 2011). Individuals are projected to be seeking objective career outcomes and a sense of psychological success via voluntary mobility rather than pursuing a career entirely within an employer (Hall, 2002). Working in a variety of jobs can lead to gains in knowledge, skill, and a diversity of perspectives (Becker, 1964). Greater mobility, through the increased number of contacts and relationships formed (social capital), can lead to higher status, higher paying jobs, and a sense of greater self worth (Granovetter, 1973; Seibert et al., 2001). As labor market opportunities and individual difference factors increase ones' interest in alternative positions, the quest for more is sought through change, hopefully leading to a new, more satisfying subjective career assessment (Ng et al., 2007).

Hypothesis 2. Greater job mobility is associated with greater subjective career success.

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