



Ten years of career success in relation to individual and situational variables from the employee development literature[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 May 2013

Available online 15 July 2013

Keywords:

Career success

Organizational support

Proactive personality

Goal orientation

Training and development

ABSTRACT

Individual, situational, and socio-demographic variables from the employee development literature were combined with theory and research on career success in a ten-year study of 289 workers from across many jobs and industries in the workforce. Support for employee development by one's employer ten years prior and a trend of increasing/accumulating support contributed to career success, providing the first long-term confirmation of the value to careers from support for development by employers. Proactive personality had unique effects on success not accounted for by a broad array of other variables, strengthening conclusions from prior research about the predictive value of proactive personality which were based on data not controlling for these variables. Finally, achievement goal orientation influenced success in a unique way via "profile effects." Goal orientation dimensions interacted to predict success, suggesting simple linear effects (e.g. being more learning-oriented) may be inadequate in explaining career success. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Career success is a topic that is very important to both individuals and organizations, and researchers have been attempting to understand the individual and organizational factors that facilitate employees' career success. One promising area of research and practice that has been receiving increasing attention and which includes both individual and organizational constructs is employee development. According to the [Society for Human Resource Management \(2008\)](#), one of the most common overall actions organizations have taken in response to pressing workplace trends is investing more in supporting training and development to boost skill levels of employees. Likewise, employee development has become something that is very important to workers as part of their careers and work lives (cf. [Hall & Mirvis, 1995](#)). While the literature suggests that supporting and promoting employee development can enhance positive outcomes for organizations and employees ([ASTD \(American Society for Training & Development\), 1999](#); [Birdi, Allan, & Warr, 1997](#); [Craig, Kimberly, & Bouchikhi, 2002](#); [Davenport & Prusak, 1997](#); [Hall & Mirvis, 1995](#); [Hurtz & Williams, 2009](#); [Kraimer, Seibert, Wayne, Liden, & Bravo, 2011](#); [Koster, de Grip, & Fourage, 2011](#); [Paul & Anantharaman, 2004](#); [Senge, 1990](#); [Tansky & Cohen, 2001](#)), there are significant challenges in the present literature. Although great effort and expense often go into supporting and promoting employee development ([Paradise, 2008](#)), there has been little to no research on long-term effects of employee development constructs on success in careers of workers. We do not know if support for development by organizations or if the development activities in which employees engage truly pay off down the road in terms of career success. Furthermore, there is a need for research that goes beyond testing separate individual or situational

[☆] This study was funded by a grant from the SHRM Foundation in which the first author served as PI. However, the interpretations, conclusions and recommendations are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the SHRM Foundation.

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variables in different studies to research involving an expanded set of predictors together in the same study, allowing for multivariate tests for relations among them (cf. Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). The present study responded to these needs by exploring such empirical linkages between a variety of theoretically-relevant predictors from employee development research, on the one hand, and literature on career success in the workforce on the other. Very importantly, this study examined these relationships over a ten year period.

1.1. Brief review of career success definitions and theoretical overview

1.1.1. Career success defined

Career success can be defined as the accumulated positive outcomes resulting from one's work experiences (Ng et al., 2005; Seibert & Kraimer, 2001). The literature often refers to career success in one of two ways. These include objective or extrinsic career success, or those aspects that can be evaluated objectively, such as salary and the number of promotions in one's career (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995). A second way that career success is measured is subjectively or by intrinsic career success measures such as job and career satisfaction (e.g., Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). Both objective and subjective career success have been considered important (Boudreau, Boswell, & Judge, 2001; Gattiker & Larwood, 1988; Judge et al., 1995), and so both are addressed in the present study.

1.1.2. Theoretical perspectives relevant to career success

There are at least three theoretical perspectives or systems that can help to explain the effects of the various constructs in the present study on career success. These systems are distinct in nature, but they are not mutually exclusive. They include two systems of upward mobility in society (contest mobility and sponsored mobility) as well as human capital theory. We briefly review each of these in turn.

First, according to Ng et al. (2005), Turner (1960) described two systems of upward mobility in society—contest mobility and sponsored mobility. Contest mobility occurs when the person adds value to a company via his/her job performance and mobility. Those who contribute enhanced abilities and performance will advance and get ahead. Sponsored mobility occurs when elites pay special attention to those deemed to have high potential. When people get special attention from those in power, they benefit to gain momentum, advance and succeed. From the perspective of human capital theory, employees invest in their own human capital (Becker, 1975). Those who invest more time, effort, and money in education, training, and experience should reap rewards of such investments. These investments should result in increased rewards from the employer, including salary increases. Research has shown investments such as formal educational attainment (e.g. degrees attained) to be positively related to outcomes like salary progression (Bretz & Judge, 1994; Stroh, Brett, & Reilly, 1992) and promotability (Sheridan, Slocum, & Buda, 1997). Tharenou, Latimer, and Conroy (1994) provided some limited cross-sectional evidence that training and conferences are related to managerial level and salary in Australia.

Ng et al. (2005) reviewed four sets of variables used to predict career success: human capital, organizational sponsorship, socio-demographic, and stable individual differences. Human capital includes an individual's education, personal and professional experiences. Organizational sponsorship involves organizations providing special assistance such as support and resources, for example training and skill development opportunities and support. Socio-demographic predictors include variables such as gender, age and marital status. Stable individual difference variables include various personality and other person constructs. Ng et al. (2005) found that training and development opportunities were positively associated with salary, promotions, and career satisfaction and overall this construct was a relatively good predictor from the organizational sponsorship category. Proactivity was similarly a relatively good individual difference predictor of various career success outcomes among many personality variables examined. Both of these constructs, training and development support and opportunity and proactive personality, have significant research literatures associated with them besides the career success literature, suggesting that these are important constructs in human resources, organizational behavior and applied psychology. Ng et al. (2005) suggested that researchers may need to examine these and other predictors in more detail to more fully understand the complex phenomenon of career success. Given the state of prior research, that meta-analysis was not able to examine individual behavior relevant to employee development which might also predict career success because the literature has not paid much attention to that possibility. Thus, a more focused examination of how employee development affects career success is warranted, and the present study empirically tested the potential connections between the two literatures.

1.2. Brief background on employee development literature and preview of present study

Within the literature on employee development, research has not only addressed work support for employee training and development opportunities as a situational/organizational variable that can influence development behavior (cf. Maurer, Lippstreu, & Judge, 2008; Maurer, Weiss, & Barbeite, 2003; Noe & Wilk, 1993), but also research has focused on a variety of individual difference variables that predispose one toward development behavior, including broad dispositional and demographic constructs (cf. Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2000; Major, Turner, & Fletcher, 2006; Maurer et al., 2008). As will be illustrated below, a variety of studies and theories strongly suggest that some of these variables that have been examined in the training and development literature should also be very relevant to career success, and they may offer a richer insight into the phenomenon of career success that adds to the present literature.

Drawing on this literature on employee development, the present study provided several new and valuable research contributions. We examined important and theoretically relevant variables in relation to career success. Work support for employee training/development was examined in greater detail than has ever been done in the career success research literature, and it was done over a ten

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