

The effects of objective career success on subsequent subjective career success

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 July 2012

Available online 27 September 2012

Keywords:

Core self evaluation

Gender

Human capital

Promotion

Salary

Economic cycle

ABSTRACT

We use a sample of working adults ($N = 638$) to explore the effects of past objective career success (mobility, promotions, and salary change) on current subjective success (human capital assessments by one's managers, core self evaluations, satisfaction with one's career) by gender, across an economic cycle (2004–2011), controlling for career stage. Results support a strong influence of past promotions, and less so for salary changes, on subjective career success. These effects were stronger for men and during the economic contraction, with managers being affected in their assessments based on the employees' past promotions. In contrast, past job mobility did *not* relate to subjective career success for either gender in periods of economic expansion or contraction. Evidence for an interactive perspective of career success whereby past objective success affects current subjective success is presented, as well as potential implications of the findings.

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Based on the contest-mobility perspective of career success, a career consists of an ongoing tournament in which all compete in a fair and open marketplace; success is a function of past accomplishments and self improvements (Rosenbaum, 1984). This perspective directs one's attention to the observable, objective measures of career success – an individual's job mobility, promotions, and compensation (Lam, Ng, & Feldman, 2012; Stumpf, 2007). Extensive research has studied these career actions and outcomes by identifying individual, situational, and social factors that predict or contribute to them (Lam et al., 2012; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Both human capital theory (Becker, 1964) and social capital theory (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973) support the search for the causes of career success. Generally ignored in this search is the role past objective career success plays in one's current subjective experience of their career and satisfaction with it. When careers are viewed as a journey of transitions over one's working life (Hall, 1976, 1996; Sullivan, 1999; Super, 1980), there is an implicit understanding that what has already occurred will affect current and future career success (Feldman & Ng, 2007; Super, 1980).

This is particularly relevant because many young professionals in the middle of the last decade advanced quickly and expected to continue doing so. Following the recession of 2000–2002, the demand for young professionals in the United States increased substantially creating a 'war for talent' that lasted until late in the decade. Organizations were facing severe difficulties recruiting and retaining the talent to support global operations (Scullion, Caligiuri, & Collings, 2008). During the economic expansion, young professionals had job mobility because of a tight labor market. Their accomplishments and enhanced capabilities increased the value of their human capital to organizations which led to more promotions and higher compensation (Becker, 1964; Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Stumpf, 2007; Tharenou, 1997; Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999). This wave of objective career success slowed with the 2008 recession. A "fair and open marketplace" in which young professionals had been experiencing advancement changed to a labor market that threatened their employment and slowed their career progression (Briscoe, Henagan, Burton, & Murphy, 2012).

Past career mobility, promotions, and salary change – particularly because these actions are often visible to others and appear to be objective indices of success – set the stage for future opportunities and affect the way professionals perceive themselves and are perceived by others. We explore how past job mobility, promotions, and salary changes of young professionals influence: (1)

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human capital assessments of them made by their managers, (2) their core self evaluations, and (3) their satisfaction with their career. We examine the extent to which gender may moderate these relationships during varying labor market conditions (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004) while controlling for career stage (Lawrence, 1988; Super, 1980). Fig. 1 summarizes the study variables.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Subjective career success

Subjective career success reflects individuals' judgments about their career attainments including such assessments as the value of their human capital (Stumpf, 2007, 2010), their appraisals of their self-worth and capabilities (Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012), and the satisfaction they experience in their career (Burke, 2001; Judge et al., 1995).

The value of one's human capital as perceived by the organization is central to the contest-mobility perspective. Manager assessments of the competencies of their direct reports are one measure of human capital. Others include years of work experience, job tenure, educational level, knowledge, and skills (Ng et al., 2005).

A second subjective measure of career success is how one evaluates their worth. Judge, Locke, and Durham (1997) developed the concept of core self-evaluation (CSE) to capture the essence of one's appraisal of their self worth and capabilities. CSE is a generalized trait derived from four personality traits: self-esteem, self-efficacy, neuroticism, and locus of control (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011; Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998). CSE is considered a stable trait – it is not expected to change much over time (for a review see Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011). Self-positive individuals benefit from a cumulative advantage in their careers as they begin on a better footing and the career growth that they enjoy builds on itself (Judge & Hurst, 2008). The present research offers an opportunity to hypothesize that objective career success also feeds CSE in a virtuous cycle.

A third subjective measure of career success is the satisfaction with one's career (Heslin, 2003). This reflects one's affect associated with the accumulated experiences of their work life (Srivastava, Locke, Judge, & Adams, 2010). Job satisfaction, which is more associated with one's current work, can be viewed as a constituent of career satisfaction (Erdogan & Bauer, 2005; Lounsbury, Gibson, Steel, Lundstrom, & Loveland, 2004).

1.2. Job mobility and subjective career success

Increased job mobility, individuals changing jobs within and between organizations, is an outgrowth of their following protean (Hall, 1976) and boundaryless careers (Arthur, 1994). According to these theories, individuals, not organizations, drive their careers based on a sense of psychological success and preferences rather than formal career paths based on vocational and career management systems (Hall, 2002). One benefit of job mobility, according to human capital theory (Becker, 1964), is that working in a variety of jobs provides more diverse work experiences leading to gains in job-related knowledge, skills, and a diversity in perspectives – all of which enhance one's human capital to employers. Social capital theory (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973) further predicts that greater job mobility, through the increased number of contacts and relationships formed, will lead to higher status, higher paying jobs, and the feeling of greater self worth (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). To the extent that people

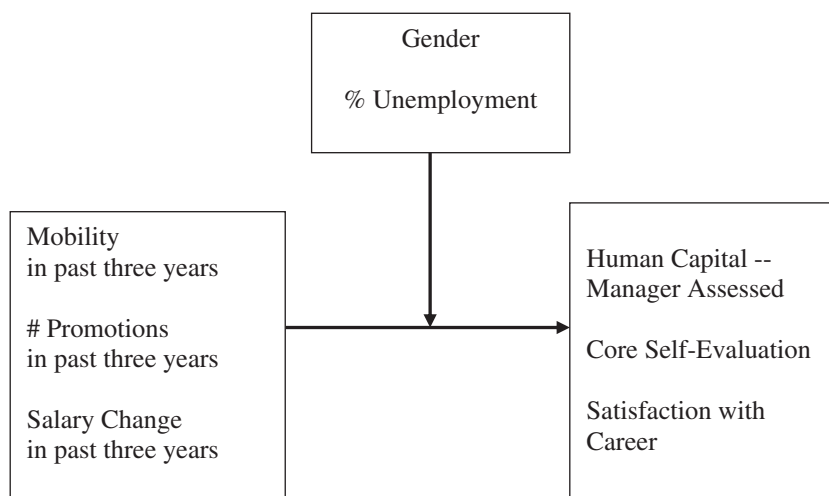


Fig. 1. Hypothesized job mobility and past objective career success effects on subsequent subjective career assessments.

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