



Evaluating career success of African American males: It's what you know and who you are that matters

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 August 2010

Available online 25 March 2011

Keywords:

Career success

African American men

Relative importance

ABSTRACT

The objectives of the present study were to identify the factors related to career success of college educated, African American men and to explore the relative importance of human capital, social capital, individual differences, and demographic attributes in predicting career success. Using a sample of 247 African American males, we found some variables identified in previous research using primarily Caucasian samples were related to career success with this sample, while others were not. Additionally, human capital variables and demographic variables were found to be the most important sets of predictors for career success. Theoretical and practical implications, as well as limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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The United States workforce is becoming increasingly diverse and this diversity is one of the critical global challenges facing organizations. Riche (2000) and Mor Barak (2005) provide statistical information and explanations for these demographic shifts, which have resulted in more women and persons of color in the workplace. Further, Morrison and von Glinow (1990) report that since 1970 women, African American, and Hispanic managers have more than quadrupled. With this increased diversity many scholars have called for empirical research on diverse individuals (e.g., London & Noe, 1997; Nkomo, 1992). Given that diverse individuals often face workplace discrimination (Bell & Nkomo, 1994; Perry & Locke, 1985; Westphal & Stern, 2007), one area of particular interest is identifying factors related to their career success (e.g., Brown, 1995; Fouad & Bingham, 1995).

To some extent these calls for research have been answered. There is a growing body of research focusing on women's career experiences. Specifically, research has documented the unique barriers to women's career progression (e.g., Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Powell & Mainero, 1992; Russell & Eby, 1993), factors predicting their career success (e.g., Metz & Tharenou, 2001), as well as comparisons of men and women's salary and promotion rate (e.g., Kirchmeyer, 1998; Stroh, Brett, & Reilly, 1992). While research on women's career experiences is important, demographic trends also indicate increasing racial and ethnic minority representation in organizations. However, little empirical research exists on their career experiences (for exceptions see Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Parks-Yancy, 2010; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999). The relatively small number of African Americans in professional and managerial ranks (Cokley, Dreher, & Stockdale, 2004), coupled with the fact that African Americans are one of the largest minority groups (cf. Kaba, 2008), highlights the importance of understanding what predicts their career success. This is important because African Americans often have different career experiences, and face unique barriers, compared to both Caucasians and other minority group members (Eby, Johnson, & Russell, 1998; Thomas & Alderfer, 1989). Therefore, it seems premature to assume that those variables which consistently predict career success among Caucasians, such as career-related mentoring and training opportunities (Ng, Eby, Sorenson, & Feldman, 2005), will yield the same career benefits for African Americans.

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Of particular interest in the present study is the career success of African American men. The rationale for focusing on this specific group is that African American men earn 73% of Caucasian male earnings (Bendrick, 1998), are laid off at disproportionate rates (Field & Winfrey, 1997; King & Johnson, 2003), and are the most underemployed segment of the working population (Feldman, 1996). In addition, although African Americans in general contend with stereotypes and biases that can impede their career success (e.g., Bell & Nkomo, 1994; Eby et al., 1998), the stereotypes associated with African American men are both distinct and more negative than those associated with African Americans in general. While stereotypes of African Americans in general include lazy, uneducated, and unmotivated (cf. Cox, 1994), African American men in particular are perceived as violent, sexually powerful, athletic, and childlike (Hall, 2001; Lombardo, 1978).

These negative stereotypes, coupled with the unique career issues African American men may face in the workplace, highlight the importance of examining what predicts their career success. Consistent with the aims of the Special Issue, we are aware of little, if any, empirical research on this topic, answering the call for research on the career issues facing understudied populations. Given the economic condition of African American men, we conceptualize career success in terms of objective indicators of status and prestige. This includes promotion rate, compensation, and managerial level (Bray & Howard, 1988; London & Stumpf, 1983). We realize that subjective indicators of career success (e.g., career satisfaction) are also important. However, this group's unique history of economic and social oppression argues strongly for a focus on objective indicators of career success.

Further, Perry and Locke (1985) describe the educational and economic systems as two societal systems that "directly circumscribe the career development of African American men" (p. 106). The authors discuss the outcomes associated with an educational system that maintains a subordinate social status of Blacks, resulting in differential economic attainment (e.g., compensation and rate of employment). When assessing historical structural inequalities, Hacker (1995) has gone as far as to suggest that two separate, unequal, and hostile nations exist within the United States: one African American and one White. Bell (in press) gives a cogent historical account of Blacks in the United States, summarizing the institution of slavery, legalized discrimination and segregation, and the associated effects. Her summary is consistent with Greenhaus et al. (1990), who provide evidence of access and treatment discrimination adversely impacting the career trajectory of African Americans. Further, recent Bureau of Labor Statistics data indicate 24% of African American men worked in managerial/professional occupations, compared to 35% of white men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Black men were also more likely to be out of the labor force for longer periods of time, and when employed they were represented more than any other race/ethnic group in production, transportation, and material handling occupations. Of particular relevance to the current study, historically these occupations are lower paying and offer fewer opportunities for professional advancement. This begs the question of why African American men are not achieving success at the same rate as other groups. Examining the predictors of career success among African American men is one important step toward understanding this social and economic phenomenon.

Given this gap in the literature, the present study pursues three main objectives. First, we use previous research on variables associated with the career success of Caucasian males and females (Ng et al., 2005; London & Stumpf, 1983; Perry & Locke, 1985) to examine their applicability to African American men. Second, we identify additional variables from the diversity literature and examine their relationship to career success among this population. Third, we examine the relative importance of four broad categories of variables (i.e., human capital predictors, social capital predictors, individual differences, and demographic attributes) in predicting the career success of African American men.

Accomplishing these objectives will provide the first empirical examination of the factors that are important for the career success of African American men and allow us to compare these variables to those that have been identified for Caucasians and females. This information will be useful for career scholars as they build theoretical models to explain similarities and differences among various diverse groups' career experiences. Our findings will also isolate the specific variables that predict career success for this group. This will provide an important foundation for future theory building and empirical research on African American men. Findings of the present study will also provide practical information for individuals, career counselors and coaches in terms of managing their careers, and for organizations interested in maximizing the potential of a diverse workforce.

Factors related to career success

Previous research has identified several categories of variables that are related to career success. Generally speaking this includes human capital variables, social capital variables, individual differences, and demographic attributes (e.g., Ng et al., 2005; Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003; Tharenou, 2001). In the present study we used these theoretically grounded and established categories in making predictions about the career success of African American men.

Hypothesized relationships

Human capital

Human capital theory purports that investments, by either the individual or organization, in education, work experience and on-the-job training lead to increased productivity, pay and job status, and ultimately upward mobility (Becker, 1993). In fact, human capital variables have been purported to be the strongest and most consistent predictors of managerial progression (Kirchmeyer, 1998). While black males' educational attainment is much lower than that of Caucasians (U.S. Census, 2009), those achieving higher levels of educational attainment may combat stereotypes and gain additional credibility which may afford entrée to high quality jobs and greater career success. Likewise, several studies have found a positive relationship between organizational tenure and career success (e.g., Stroh et al., 1992; Boudreau, Boswell, & Judge, 2001; Cox & Harquail, 1991; Hurley & Sonnenfeld,

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