



# Meaning and determinants of career success: A Malaysian perspective<sup>1</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This exploratory, qualitative study sought to unearth and explore meanings of career success and perceived influences on career success among working adults in Malaysia. Eighteen people in nursing, blue-collar, and business occupations were interviewed. Three objective and five subjective meanings of career success and six perceived internal factors (primarily individual traits) and three external factors emerged from the data. The research suggests that people in the early stage of their career are more instrumentally driven in defining career success, whereas people in the late stage of their career target a greater variety of career features and outcomes. Also, the research suggests Malaysian working adults should not be stereotyped as being satisfied with collective outcomes as many also target individual achievements.

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## El significado del éxito en la carrera profesional y sus determinantes: la perspectiva malaya

### RESUMEN

Este estudio exploratorio cualitativo busca descubrir y explorar los significados del éxito en la carrera profesional y las influencias que aprecian en el mismo los trabajadores adultos malayos. Se entrevistó a 18 personas de las profesiones de enfermería, obreros y del mundo empresarial. De los datos surgieron tres significados objetivos y cinco subjetivos acerca del éxito en la carrera profesional y se apreciaron seis factores internos (sobre todo rasgos individuales) y tres externos. La investigación indica que cuando se encuentran en las primeras fases de su carrera profesional, a las personas las mueve un mayor afán instrumental al definir el éxito profesional, mientras que en fases más avanzadas de su carrera profesional se centran en una mayor variedad de características y resultados de la misma. Igualmente la investigación apunta que los trabajadores adultos no deberían estereotiparse en el sentido de contentarse con los resultados colectivos, dado que muchos se centran también en logros individuales.

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In recent years, career success has become the focus of an increasing number of career scholars in their theoretical and empirical works (e.g., Lawrence, 2011; Lirio et al., 2007). Although the study of career success has progressed significantly, the majority of career success research has been conducted in Western countries (predominantly in the USA) and using quantitative methodology leading to calls for more research on this topic in more diverse career contexts (both within and across cultures) and using qualitative approaches (cf. Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Heslin, 2005). Responding to these calls, we attempt to expand this line of research by examining career success in a non-Western context using qualitative methodology.

To date, little is known about how Malaysians conceptualize careers. In particular, a study on how working Malaysians in different occupations and career stages conceptualize career success has yet to be found in the management literature. Past studies on career success in Malaysia have been mostly on women and academics (e.g., Arokiasamy, Ismail, Ahmad, & Othman, 2011; Ismail & Ibrahim, 2007; Ismail & Rasdi, 2006) or used quantitative surveys to predict career success (e.g., Rasdi, Ismail, & Garavan, 2011). Accordingly, to address this gap, the purpose of this exploratory study was to gain an understanding of how people from different occupational and career stage groups in Malaysia conceptualize career success. Additionally, for a more complete understanding, we sought to identify what these groups saw as factors that influence career success. Although career perceptions and experiences are individual in nature, we believe that some commonalities would emerge from the study evidence. Specifically, we attempted to answer the following research questions:

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1. How do working adults in Malaysia define career success and what do they believe to be the main determinants of career success?
2. Are there key differences in how people from different occupational groups view career success and its determinants?
3. Are there key differences in how people at different career stages view career success and its determinants? Specifically, do people in the early stage of their career view career success differently from those in the late stage of their career?

Answers to the above questions will add to the understanding of how people in different career contexts view career success. In addition, they will help both individuals and organizations develop better strategies in managing careers. Organizations in Malaysia, in particular, need to understand how their employees at various levels and stages view their career success before they can provide an employment environment conducive for meeting employees' career expectations.

## Background Literature

**Meaning of career success.** A career is an evolving sequence of a person's work-related experiences over time (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989, p. 8), and one does not need to have a professional job, occupational stability, or upward mobility to have a career (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000; Hall, 2002). The desired outcomes or accumulated achievements (real or perceived) that result from these work-related experiences constitute career success (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). According to career researchers, these positive outcomes can be extrinsic (objective career success), such as hierarchical position or salary, or intrinsic (subjective career success), such as personal feelings of career accomplishment (Hennequin, 2007; Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Nicholson & de Waal-Andrews, 2005).

The general view is that objective career success and subjective career success are related, although there is still debate as to the direction of the relationship (cf. Hall & Chandler, 2005; Nicholson & de Waal-Andrews, 2005). Although related, these two constructs are conceptually different, and people who have achieved success in the objective sense may not actually feel successful or proud of their achievements (Korman, Wittig-Berman, & Lang, 1981). These constructs have also been found to be empirically distinct with different predictors (see Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005 for a meta-analytic review). For example, one study found educational achievement to predict objective career success but not subjective career success and work centrality to predict subjective career success but not objective career success (e.g., Nabi, 1999). Therefore, for a more complete understanding of the concept, both objective and subjective career success need to be included in models of career success.

Past researchers have identified several criteria for assessing objective and subjective career success. Traditionally, salary progression and job promotion were the objective criteria researchers commonly adopted in their work on career success. Heslin (2005), however, has argued that these traditional criteria are both contaminated and deficient. For example, the traditional criteria of hierarchical advancement may have limited relevance for people in occupations that offer little opportunities for upward progression (Hennequin, 2007) or for older employees who have already achieved success (Sturges, 1999).

Also, with the subjective criteria of career success, there is a need to consider career context and include a broader range of criteria (e.g., learning and work-life balance) that goes beyond job satisfaction and career satisfaction in future studies (Arthur et al., 2005; Heslin, 2005). This is particular true given that changes in the career environment (e.g., changes in psychological contracts, technology, and organizational structure) have made contemporary careers increasingly boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), protean (Hall, 1996), and kaleidoscopic (Sullivan & Maneiro, 2008).

**Determinants of career success.** Few would dispute the importance of the individual in contributing to career success, and much research has been done to demonstrate the effects of individual differences in predicting career success. Individual difference factors that have been found to predict career success include demographic background (e.g., Gattiker & Larwood, 1988), cognitive ability (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2010), dispositional traits (see Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2007 for a review), human capital (e.g., Judge, Klinger, & Simon, 2010), social capital (e.g., Grimland, Vigoda-Gadot, & Baruch, 2012), motivation (e.g., Traavik & Richardsen, 2010), career commitment (Poon, 2004), proactive behavior (e.g., Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999), political influence behaviors (e.g., Judge & Bretz, 1994), and networking behaviors (e.g., Wolff & Moser, 2009).

Although much of the work has focused on individual-level determinants of career success, situational determinants have also been shown to predict career success. For example, there is evidence that (a) supervisor-subordinate relationship predicts salary progression, promotability, and career satisfaction (e.g., Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999), (b) career mentoring predicts promotion rate and total compensation (e.g., Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991), and (c) employer support for development contributed to career success (e.g., Maurer & Chapman, 2013). The non-work context (e.g., family support, societal constraints) may also play a role in influencing career success (e.g., Juntunen et al., 2001; Lirio et al., 2007). For example, macroeconomic conditions (e.g., economic expansion) and public policies (e.g., affirmative action programs) can generate opportunities for greater career mobility and success (Feldman & Ng, 2007).

In Judge et al.'s (1995) model of career success, variables hypothesized to predict career success were grouped into one organizational/industry-level category (e.g., organizational size) and three individual-level categories: demographics (e.g., age), human capital (e.g., education), and motivational (e.g., ambition). More recently, Ng et al. (2005) in their meta-analytic review of the predictors of career success classified such predictors into four categories: socio-demographic status (e.g., gender), human capital (e.g., social capital), stable individual differences (e.g., personality), and organizational sponsorship (e.g., training opportunities).

Tu, Forret, and Sullivan (2006) surveyed Chinese managers in China to assess whether or not demographic, human capital, motivational, and organizational characteristics variables found to be predictive of career success in the West were also predictive of career success of Chinese professionals. These researchers concluded that Western models of career success cannot be unilaterally applied in non-Western contexts and called on researchers to pay more attention to cultural contexts when researching career issues across national borders.

Within the Malaysian context, although not much is known about what Malaysian employees saw to be the determinants of career success, there is some limited evidence that both individual and situational factors are at play. For example, Ismail, Rasdi, and Wahat (2005) interviewed 31 female college professors and found this group of employees to attribute their career success to factors such as education, career centrality (e.g., career focus), health consciousness, religiosity, and institutional support (e.g., sabbatical leave). More recently, Rasdi et al. (2011), in a quantitative survey of 288 Malaysian managers, found demographic and human capital factors to predict objective career success and demographic, individual, and structural factors to predict subjective career success.

## Method

### Study Participants

This exploratory study, conducted in Malaysia, was part of an initial phase of a global research initiative aimed at studying contemporary careers across various cultures (see Briscoe, Hall, & Mayrhofer,

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