

How to maximise the chances of career satisfaction and career success

Vicky Sinclair reflects on the research evidence



Understanding the changing employment climate in a challenging economic conjuncture, acquiring knowledge of recent career research and the tools that have been developed as a result, but most importantly, knowing oneself and what

one really wants from life as a whole, in order to make apt and aware choices over time, seems to be a valid hypothesis, in order to maximise individuals' chances of experiencing career satisfaction and success over the life course. However, it is difficult to expect all individuals to become experts in career management, or to be their own counsellor at all times. In a rapidly changing and evolving world, within which career paths need to adapt, reaching out for guidance, whether it be consulting a career counsellor, a coach, a mentor, or even a therapeutic counsellor, seems to be of crucial importance, for individuals to make sense of how their professional life is evolving, and gain awareness, self-efficacy and agency.

Setting the frame

In terms of occupational studies, Giddens¹ highlights two fundamental levels of analysis: While some theories emphasise human agency or 'action', others concentrate on institutional or structural analysis. In order to have a holistic vision, it seems crucial that both intrapersonal and societal levels of analysis be seen in conjunction, while also incorporating interpersonal and group level analysis. A good way to see the question is through metaphors emanating from the constructivist worldview, such as systems theory². The title of this article implies a reductionistic approach and I will adopt an individualistic perspective, without losing sight of interpersonal and societal contexts. The Mayrhofer

'onion peel' model³ also offers a good visual representation of contextual factors in career research. With this in mind, a discursive approach seems the most appropriate. I will start by defining the main terms of the question and review some traditional theories and models, without attempting an exhaustive study. I will then review some of the main research and development on career success and draw conclusions on what research suggests is the best individual approach to experiencing career satisfaction and career success over the life course.

Considering objective career success and subjective career satisfaction

The definition of career adopted in this article is 'an evolving sequence of a person's work experience over time'^{4,5}. Some practitioners suggest that career success begins with career satisfaction⁶. This definition seems somewhat unfounded, as it is equally possible to say that career satisfaction begins with career success. In a meta-analysis, Ng, Eby et al⁷ link the terms 'success' and 'satisfaction' with objective and subjective concepts respectively. In order to identify predictors of career success, Ng used salary level and promotion as dependent measures of objective career success, and subjective career success was represented by career satisfaction. This does not clearly explain the difference between career satisfaction and career success. While most literature in the field relates to career success⁸⁻¹⁰, career satisfaction tends to be seen as a subjective by-product of success. In a comprehensive review paper titled 'conceptualising and evaluating career success', Helsin¹¹ exposes that objective career success has mainly been linked with promotion, pay and occupational status¹² while subjective career success is defined by an individual's reactions to his or her unfolding career experiences. Helsin¹¹ does confirm that subjective career success is most commonly operationalised as either job or career

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satisfaction, as numerous academics^{8,13-15} have also used job satisfaction as a proxy for subjective career success. Shein¹⁶ argues that it is important to determine if people considered to have hierarchical and financial success are also satisfied with their career. It is important to note that success does not systematically mean satisfaction and vice versa¹¹.

In summary, objective career success seems to be measured through tangible elements and mainly external judgments (eg social position, income, occupational status etc), while subjective career success and satisfaction are evaluated through personal points of view, which may include pay and social position, but also address much broader and complex issues, such as well-being and emotions⁵, which are not always easy to define. I would therefore tend to disagree with the assumption that career satisfaction could be seen within the broader definition of career success, but on the contrary, would see the term ‘career satisfaction’ as a more holistic concept, including all aspects. Khapova, Arthur and Wilderom¹⁷ highlight the need to explore the link between objective and subjective career outcomes. Research tends to indicate that it is important that individuals adopt both an objective and a subjective approach, to explore what they can do to maximise their chances of experiencing career satisfaction and success¹⁸.

Acquiring some knowledge of traditional theories, tools and models

Historically, career theories are rooted in linear stage models and developmental theories derived from psychoanalysis¹⁹⁻²² typified this approach. As an example, the ‘life line’ exercise is a fairly easy to follow process which can help individuals to make sense of their career history, as a basis for exploration. Driver²³ outlined four possibilities of career development: 1. The steady-state career, where a person stays in the same job for most of his/her career; 2. The traditional linear career in which a person moves onward and upward within

an organisation, 3. The spiral career, consisting of several different careers, and 4. The transitory career, in which there is a great deal of job change and no identifiable career pattern²⁴. Within the ontogenic/sociogenic debate, Driver’s work on career concepts acknowledged the effects of both personal development and the environment on career patterns. His first two career concepts are related to the ontogenic theories, while his third and fourth concepts reflect more recent changes in the landscape of work expectations that require people to continually build their skills and knowledge²⁵.

Various tools have been developed to help individuals make the right career choice, which is a key element of career success and satisfaction. Holland’s Strong Interest Inventory (SII) offers tools to identify career preferences according to personal traits and natural preferences. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) also links personality types to occupational choice. Schein²⁶ proposes a self assessment questionnaire, allowing individuals to identify their career anchors for themselves. However, research implies that these tools are best used with the help of career counsellors²⁷.

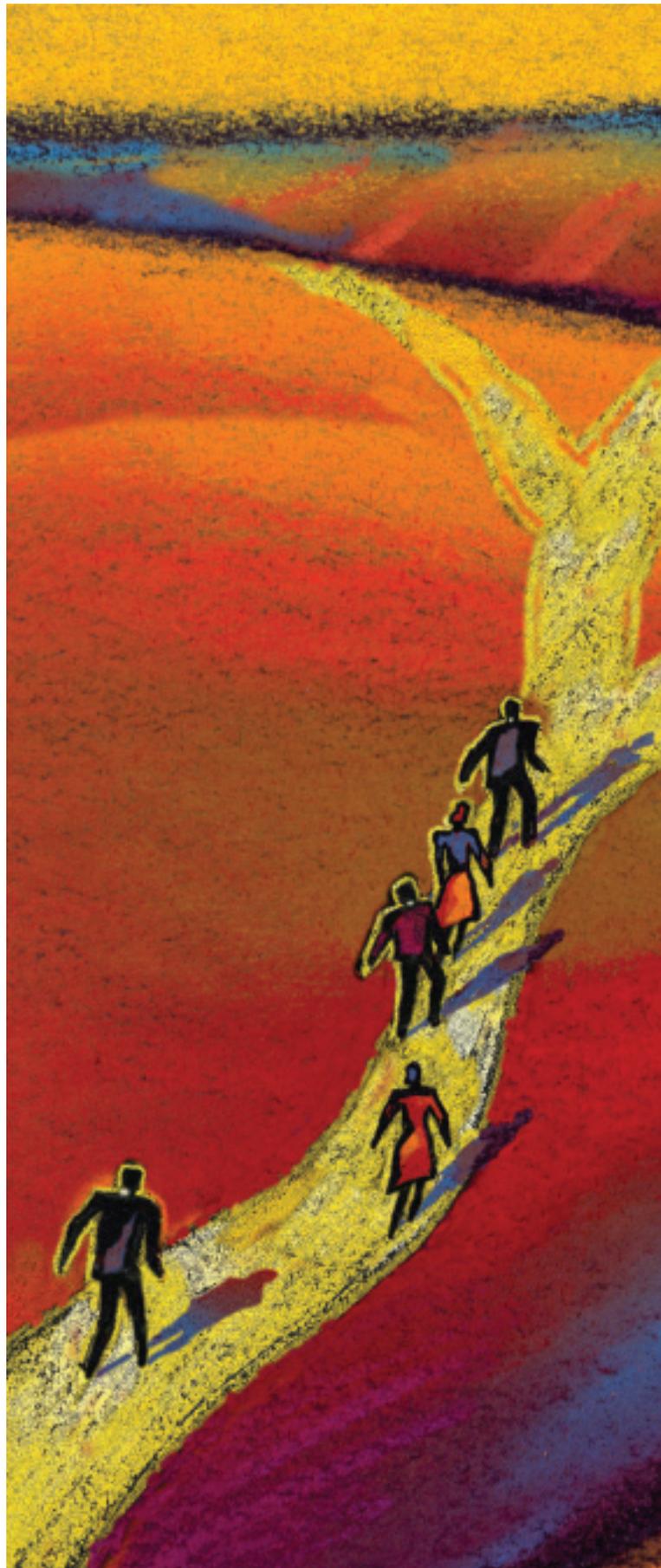
Identifying predictors of career success

This links to various predictors of career success and wellbeing. In a meta-analysis, Ng, Eby et al⁷ identified four categories of predictors of objective and subjective career success: human capital, organisational sponsorship, sociodemographic status and stable individual differences. In this latest variable, Ng includes the big five personality factors. These traits include conscientiousness, emotional stability, extroversion, openness to experience and agreeableness. Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller²⁸ include proactive personality, agentic and communal orientation and core self-evaluations. Seibert et al²¹ identified which of the five personality factors related negatively or positively to career success. In short, the results show that extroversion and conscientiousness are positively related to career satisfaction, while neuroticism and surprisingly, agreeableness and openness, are negatively related to career satisfaction, particularly regarding salary levels. Lounsbury et al²⁹ investigated the impact of intelligence and personality in relation to career satisfaction, the results of which suggest that a significant relationship between intelligence and career satisfaction may be observed. Bozionelos⁹ talks about extrinsic (objective) and intrinsic (subjective) career success, the latter being almost exclusively associated with personality traits.

Within the increasingly popular positive organisational behaviour research, the notion of positive psychological capital has been used by Luthans et al³⁰ to measure the relationship between PsyCap, performance and satisfaction. PsyCap's four variables are Hope, Resilience, Optimism and Efficacy. Luthans developed a micro-intervention based on this concept, aiming at changing self-defeating behaviour via a one to three hours intervention. Even though this concept is very interesting, this kind of 'quick-fix' approach seems a little dubious but could certainly be used as a 'first step' sensitising exercise. Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been embraced by the positive movement. EI's positiveness includes enhanced self-esteem, wellbeing, flow, optimism and community values³¹. In a recent study, Lent et al³² link work satisfaction with subjective wellbeing in the context of work. Here again, the central pathways of work satisfaction include personality and affective traits. Kidd's³³ most recent research identified seven features of career wellbeing, as well as 15 positive and 24 negative emotions. Kidd's work on the absence of emotion in career theory³³, allowed this very important aspect to be addressed and included in career studies. Moreover, some negative aspects (negative emotions in her recent paper) are included. Vardi³⁴ exposes that researchers still expound on the positive aspects of careers, at the expense of their potential downsides and threats. Without exploring the darker side of careers, a well-rounded, balanced and comprehensive understanding of careers cannot be successfully attained. Indeed, not addressing this would make it difficult for individuals to identify what negative aspects could be changed, in order to experience more professional success and satisfaction.

Seeing the limits of precise variables and how to extend them to a narrative approach

This non-exhaustive list of research aims to define precise variables related to career success, satisfaction and wellbeing, in order to draw measurable conclusions. Although the results present valuable information, the amount of different matrices may be somewhat confusing and limiting. Arthur et al¹⁸ mention that more research needs to be led, for rapprochement between career theory and career success research. Since 1997, researchers such as Cochran³⁵ have been highlighting the fact that scholars and practitioners have been attracted to theories offering a deeper view of career, but have been frustrated by difficulties in translating theories into



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viable practice. Since then, attempts have been made to link traditional tools with narrative approaches. As an example, Sangganjanavanich and Milkavich³⁶ highlight the paucity of literature surrounding the process of interpretation, when working with widely used tools such as the MBTI and the Strong Interest Inventory, and suggest a narrative approach. McGregir, McAdams and Little³⁷ examined the relations between life-stories, personality traits and personal goals, and their overall impact on happiness in life as a whole. Results indicated that people who reported the highest levels of happiness were those who maintained personal goals consistent with their personality traits and thematically linked with their life story. These findings demonstrate that when people pursue personal and career goals congruent with their traits, disposition and, by extension, their own self-construals via life stories, happiness results³⁸. This concept of happiness 'at large' could logically include career success and satisfaction.

Understanding important concepts of autonomy, power, mobility, self-efficacy, self-esteem

A crucial aspect of career wellbeing identified by Kidd⁵ is having autonomy and power. The 'Protean' career as exposed by Hall³⁹ focuses on achieving subjective career success through self-directed vocational behaviour, while the 'Boundaryless' mindset focuses on organisational mobility preference⁴⁰. Self-directed behaviour suggests more control over one's career, resulting in apt choices and a potential increase in career satisfaction. Mobility suggests frequent changes which may also result in satisfaction and success. Kidd's⁵ research shows that an important feature of career wellbeing is career mobility. To follow such paths, individuals must develop a portable career capital. They must also learn how to adapt to change, with confidence and self-efficacy⁴¹. In addition to abilities, interests and personality traits, self-concept and self-confidence represent another major source of relatively stable individual difference characteristics related to work competence and career success. People embrace their self-perceived competencies as integral components of their self-concept and as cornerstones of their self-esteem⁴².

Envisaging counselling or coaching

Judge and Locke⁴³ analysed the effect of dysfunctional thought processes on subjective wellbeing and job satisfaction. Results strongly supported the predictions that dysfunctional thoughts affected subjective wellbeing and job

satisfaction and highlight the beneficial effects of EAPs (employee assistance programmes) in order to achieve a dramatic and long lasting increase in overall effect after several weeks of regular cognitive therapy sessions. Although the benefits of workplace counselling are well documented⁴⁴, this service seems mainly oriented towards the management of stress, mental health difficulties and sometimes serious psychological issues⁴⁵. Career counselling, on the other hand, focuses on careers guidance without overstepping the boundaries by engaging in therapy. Arnaud⁴⁶ presents an interesting alternative in his study entitled 'A coach or a couch? A Lacanian perspective on executive coaching and consulting'. Even though psychoanalysis applied to coaching is not new, Rotenberg⁴⁷ explains how this approach is legitimate, since psychoanalytic psychotherapy has always been concerned with effective behavioural change and with the adaptational process. Psychoanalysts as coaches focus on the competency of individuals in complex organisational cultures, as well as the individual's own experience of effectiveness or lack of it. Further research would be worth conducting, on the effect of therapeutic counselling and psychotherapy on career satisfaction, success and wellbeing. For example, psychotherapy is an important way of working on low self-esteem issues, which could potentially undermine career success and satisfaction.

Learning, finding a mentor

Borrowing from training and development research, Cannell⁴⁸ defines learning as a self-directed work-based process leading to increased adaptive capacity, in other words, an environment where individuals learn to learn. Career development is a planned process of different learning experiences that may last for some months or years. This definition highlights the importance of self-responsibility in an ongoing learning endeavour. Career transitions not only require the learning of new skills and competencies, but also the development of new or the altering of old relationships⁴⁹. In 'A mentor is a key to career success', Doody⁵⁰ emphasises the importance, for individuals, of finding a mentor. Mentoring has been associated with subjective outcomes such as career satisfaction⁵¹ and objective outcome such as career progress⁵², in terms of promotion for example. Chandler and Kram⁵³ explain that post-corporate formats of new types of careers, marked by more transitions across, as well as within organisations⁵⁴, has profound implications for individuals, who must build relationships to learn,



develop and grow. Kram's suggestion that individuals typically have more than one mentor and that not all of the individual's mentors are to be found within the context of his or her job is interesting, as it considers all aspects of an individual's life, beyond the work environment, which is the tendency within a post-modern paradigm. According to Kram⁵⁵, mentoring functions can include sponsorship, coaching and protection. Mentoring can also provide exposure, visibility and challenging assignments. Finally, it includes important psychological functions, which comprise role modelling, acceptance and confirmation, counselling and friendship. In this fluid environment, it seems important that individuals form multiple, short-term relationships that make up a 'developmental network'⁵⁶.

Creating a network, developing a sense of identity

Network directly shapes career outcomes by regulating access to jobs, providing mentoring and sponsorship, channelling the flow of information and referrals, augmenting power and reputation and increasing the chances of promotion⁵⁷. The networks within which people operate have important consequences for the success and failure of their career, whether objectively or subjectively defined⁴⁹. Interestingly, the same authors argue that an identity perspective on the relationship between networks and careers is especially relevant in a world in which career changes are increasingly self-initiated rather than imposed by the organisation. In a review paper, Ashforth⁵⁸ explores how multiple identifications may conflict, converge and combine. Recent work suggests that different identities are advantageous at different stages in the career⁵⁹. Ibarra and Deshpande⁴⁹ argue that future network research should focus on subjective career processes and outcomes, including the development of social identity and satisfaction with one's subjective career.

Maintaining a satisfactory work-life balance

Studies have shown that achieving a balance between home life and work life is becoming a higher priority for many people^{60,61}. This conclusion is supported by Schein's research findings⁶² which show that growing numbers of people are endorsing a 'lifestyle' career anchor, where the individual's career is seen as an integral part of his or her total lifestyle²⁴. Studies indicate that customising one's career can have a positive impact on individuals' subjective career success,

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particularly when the effects of customising include increasing people's enjoyment of their work and reducing their job-related stress⁶³⁻⁶⁵.

Finding meaning and a life purpose

Cochran³⁵ emphasises the importance of having a life purpose. The constructivist approach concentrates on subjective truths in meaning making and mattering⁶⁶. Wrzesniewski et al⁶⁷ found that having a calling was associated with the highest life and work satisfaction. Lent et al³² highlight the long noted conceptual connection between work and overall life satisfaction, observing the 'part-whole' relationship between work and the rest of life⁴³. Career counsellors seem to agree on viewing career as a holistic concept in which work and personal life are inextricably intertwined, and that individuals are experts in their own lives, actively constructing their careers⁶⁸.

Conclusion

The current crisis is seen by some⁶⁹ as the symptom of a long-term global social trend: the shift from hierarchy to self-responsibility, which is a highly significant stage in human evolution. Interpretation of recent research conclusions highlights several elements that need to be grasped by individuals, in order to maximise their chances of career success and career satisfaction over the life course. First of all, individuals need to understand that their career is evolving within a postmodern era characterised by subjectivity, discourse and fluidity. It is important for individuals to identify the new boundaryless, protean and kaleidoscopic career patterns in order to create a narrative and find their own unique or multiple identities accordingly. Although it could be argued that fate and destiny, according to fixed or external factors such as family background or economic downturn for example, could limit people's choices, remarkable transformations can still be achieved by acts of will¹². Characteristics starting with 'self' (self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-responsibility, self-concept, self-motivation,

self-knowledge, self-esteem, self-reinvention, self-awareness etc) are in recrudescence within research literature. This emphasises the notion of individual responsibility, active choice and apt decision making. Indeed, power over people's career is no longer within the organisation but within each person. Consolidating competencies, increasing knowledge and acquiring new skills, depending on how individuals' careers evolve and develop, is of primary importance. A 'career for life' within the same organisation is becoming increasingly unlikely, so versatility, adaptability and mobility become necessities. To achieve this goal, it is crucial for individuals to develop a flexible portfolio of competencies and to create solid networks. Finally, research shows that individuals need to take a more holistic perspective and find congruence between career choices and life purpose, which they need to identify. A more diffuse boundary between work and life in general goes in line with a constructivist approach. In a challenging economic conjuncture, this complex and unpredictable work environment, full of potential for success and satisfaction, could however result in confusion and be a source of anxiety, insecurity or even failure. The intrinsic message behind research confirms the necessity, for individuals, to be able to reach out and find the right guidance, whether it be a career counsellor, a mentor, a coach or even a psychotherapist. ■

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