

Understanding and Facilitating Employee Subjective Success: Implications for Employees and Organizations

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Subjective Success

- Represents an individual's self-evaluation of success (Gattiker & Larwood, 1986; Peluchette, 1993).
- Theoretically includes a variety of potential criteria:
 - traditional external markers of success, e.g. financial and hierarchical success, and
 - intrinsic criteria, e.g. enjoyable work, work-life balance (Parker & Chusmir, 1992; Sturges, 1999; Nabi, 2001)
- No generally accepted model of the factors underlying assessments of subjective success (Heslin, 2005).

Subjective and Objective Success

- Research examining subjective success has most often used career satisfaction as a proxy for subjective success (Heslin, 2005).
 - Career satisfaction is most commonly measured as progress toward career goals such as income, advancement, and development of new skills (Greenhaus, Parasuraman & Wormley, 1990).
- Meta-analysis indicates that objective success (as measured by salary and promotions) is only moderately correlated with subjective success (as measured by career satisfaction; Ng, Eby, Sorensen & Feldman, 2005).
- Longitudinal research indicates that subjective success is not simply a by-product of objective success (Abele & Spurk, 2009)

Purpose of This Research

The goals of this research are to:

- Explore which achievements define career success and the dimensionality of these criteria.
- Examine whether or not employees believe they have the opportunity to succeed on these criteria in their current work situation.
- Model the consequences for employees' attitudes of the congruence between employees' definitions of success and their actual achievement of success criteria.

Research Hypothesis

- As the congruence increases between employees' definitions of success and their achievements on the success criteria important to them, they will experience:
 - Higher job satisfaction,
 - Higher career satisfaction,
 - Higher commitment to the organization, and
 - Lower intent to turnover.

Data Collection

Survey data was collected from:

- 6 of the 10 largest high tech companies in Ottawa, Canada
- all knowledge workers in these firms,
- total sample of 4100,
- 1509 completed surveys (response rate of 37%).

Work Profile of Respondents

- respondents' work experience included on average:
 - 12 years work experience; 9 years in high tech
 - experience with 4 different employers
 - 5.5 years experience in current organization
 - 2 years in current position
- 58% worked in product development, engineering or programming
- 32% managed the work of others
- Respondents worked an average of 46 hours per week

Personal Profile of Respondents

- average age was 36
- 67% were men, 33% women
- 97% had some post-secondary education; 66% with a university degree
- 73% were married, 50% had children

Measuring Success Criteria

- Asked respondents: “How important is each of the following achievements to **your** definition of career success?”
- Examined 15 achievements such as:
 - Doing work that I enjoy
 - Obtaining increasing financial reward
 - Being surrounded by stimulating people
 - Maintaining a balance between my work and non-work life
 - Being recognized by my colleagues for my expertise
- Used 5-point scale: “of little importance to “very important”

Analyzing the Success Criteria

- Employed principal axis factoring with orthogonal rotation
- Identified 4 factors which accounted for 42% of the variance
- Retained only those items which accounted for at least 15% of variance (loadings $> .39$).
- Only 1 item (developing relationships with others on the job) had significant loadings on 2 factors and was assigned to the factor where its loading was highest
- 2 items did not load on any of the factors:
 - Maintaining a balance between my work and non-work life
 - Obtaining personal autonomy

Success Criteria Factors

- **Personal accomplishment** (5 items, 23% variance):
 - personal sense of accomplishment, surrounded by stimulating people, learning and developing skills, enjoyable work, making a contribution to society
- **Authority** (3 items, 9% variance):
 - being in a position of authority, moving through positions of increasing responsibility, being able to influence organizational direction
- **Recognition** (3 items, 5% variance):
 - being recognized by colleagues for expertise, obtaining peer recognition, developing relationships with others on the job
- **Financial rewards** (2 items, 4% variance):
 - obtaining increasing financial rewards, earning a salary that provides a comfortable lifestyle

Success Criteria Importance Scores and Intercorrelations

	Mean Import.	σ P Acc	σ Finanl	σ Recog	σ Auth
Personal Accomplishment	4.17	.64 ^a			
Financial Rewards	4.16	.07	.71 ^a		
Recognition	3.76	.43 ^{***}	.15 ^{***}	.73 ^a	
Authority	3.25	.28 ^{***}	.31 ^{***}	.43 ^{***}	.75 ^a

^aDiagonals display Cronbach's alpha

Measuring the Achievement of Subjective Success

- Asked respondents “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your work?”
- Examined same 15 achievements rephrased as in:
 - I enjoy my work.
 - I have obtained increasing financial reward
 - I am surrounded by stimulating people
- Used 5-point scale: “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”
- To provide comparability to importance data, created scales of achieved subjective success which used the same items as those derived from the factor analysis of the importance data.

Success Achievement Score Means and Correlations with Importance

	α Achiev (# items)	Mean Achiev	σ Import P Acc	σ Import Finanl	σ Import Recog	σ Import Auth
Achieved Personal Accomplishment	.78 (5)	3.50	.26***	.04	.17***	.09***
Achieved Financial Rewards	.74 (2)	3.70	.06*	-.12***	-.01	-.05
Achieved Recognition	.71 (3)	3.50	.16***	.04	.27***	.15***
Achieved Authority	.64 (3)	3.02	.15***	.04	.17***	.24***

Comparing Importance and Achievement

- To identify gaps between the kind of success desired by respondents and what they achieved in their workplace, created a set of new variables measuring fulfillment:

$$\text{Fulfillment}_{S_i} = \text{Achievement}_{S_i} - \text{Importance}_{S_i}$$

- Positive values indicate employees are exceeding their personal success goals.
- Negative values indicate employees are not able to achieve the kind of success they seek.

The Gaps in Fulfillment

Success Factor	Mean Fulfillment	Min Score	Max Score	Std Dev
Personal Accomplishment	-.67	-3.80	2.40	.73
Financial Rewards	-.46	-4.00	3.50	1.17
Recognition	-.26	-3.67	3.33	.86
Authority	-.23	-3.67	3.00	1.06

Examining the Implications

- Examined the impact of these gaps on 4 outcomes:
 - Job satisfaction,
 - Career satisfaction,
 - Commitment, and
 - Intent to turnover
- Used hierarchical regression, controlling for objective success in terms of:
 - Level
 - Promotions
 - Salary

Outcome Measures

Outcome and Source	# items	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean
Job Satisfaction (Quinn & Shepard, 1974)	8	.81	3.52
Career Satisfaction (Greenhaus, Parasuraman & Wormley, 1990)	6	.87	3.52
Commitment (Mowday, Steers & Porter, 1979)	8	.88	3.76
Intent to Turnover (Mowday, Steers & Porter, 1979)	2	.84	2.35

Measures of Objective Success

- Controlled for 3 measures of objective success:
 - **Organizational Level** – measured as number of levels between respondents and CEO (mean = 3.9; range = 0 - 12)
 - **Promotions** – number over prior 5 years (mean = 1.3; range = 0 – 14)
 - **Salary** – respondents were given the option of providing their actual current salary or indicating its range; range data were coded as the range midpoint to create a continuous variable (mean = \$67,900; range = \$23,000 - \$200,000)

Regression Results for Objective Success (Step 1)

	DV Job Sat	DV Car Sat	DV Commit	DV Turnvr
R ² Objective Success	.01*	.08***	.02***	.00
β Level	-.02	-.10***	-.09**	.02
β Promotions	.09**	.19***	.08**	-.02
β Salary	-.02	.13***	-.07*	-.01

Hierarchical Regression Results

	DV Job Sat	DV Car Sat	DV Commit	DV Turnvr
R ² Step 1 Objective Success	.01*	.08***	.02***	.00
ΔR^2 Step 2 Fulfill Subj Succ	.29***	.24***	.15***	.21***
R ² Full Model	.30***	.32***	.16***	.21***
β Level	-.01	-.08***	-.09***	.02
β Promotions	.05*	.16***	.07**	.01
β Salary	-.15***	.01	-.13***	.08**
β Fulfill Sense Accomplish.	.37***	.28***	.38***	-.25***
β Fulfill Financial Rewards	.23***	.23***	.07*	-.12***
β Fulfill Recognition	.02	-.03	-.05	.04
β Fulfill Authority	.13***	.19***	.01	-.16***

Conclusions – Subjective Success

- The ability to fulfill one's definition of subjective success is more important to employee outcomes than objective success.
 - Fulfillment of subjective success accounted for between 75% and 100% of the variance explained in these models.
- Subjective success is multidimensional and is not fully captured by measures of career satisfaction.
- A personal sense of accomplishment is the most important success criteria for most employees and facilitating a sense of accomplishment is the most important predictor of employee attitudes.

Conclusions – Objective Success

- Objective success is not a strong predictor of job satisfaction, commitment or turnover but is related to career satisfaction.
- Salary has little independent impact on attitudinal outcomes.

Implications for Future Research

- Need to validate and utilize more complex operationalizations of subjective success.
- Need to look at employees' opportunities to achieve success as they define it.
- Need to explore why fulfillment of recognition criteria does not affect employee outcomes. Hypotheses to consider:
 - Recognition may be seen as an aspect of employee relationships rather than the organization.
 - Employees may be focused on external recognition.

Implications for Organizations

- Managers need to better understand how employees define success and look for ways to allow employees to achieve success on their own terms.
- The importance attached to personal accomplishment implies that organizations need to provide employees with meaningful work and growth opportunities.
- Money is not the only (or best) way to meet employees' needs.