



The longitudinal impact of self-efficacy and career goals on objective and subjective career success

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ABSTRACT

The present research reports on the impact of occupational self-efficacy and of career-advancement goals on objective (salary, status) and subjective (career satisfaction) career attainments. Seven hundred and thirty four highly educated and full-time employed professionals answered questionnaires immediately after graduation, three years later, and seven years later. Controlling for discipline, GPA at master's level, and gender, we found that occupational self-efficacy measured at career entry had a positive impact on salary and status three years later and a positive impact on salary change and career satisfaction seven years later. Career-advancement goals at career entry had a positive impact on salary and status after three years and a positive impact on status change after seven years, but a negative impact on career satisfaction after seven years. Women earned less than men, but did not differ from men in hierarchical status and in career satisfaction. Theoretical implications for socio-cognitive theorizing and for career-success research as well as applied implications for vocational behavior are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Research interest in career success both regarding objective parameters (e.g., salary, promotions, hierarchical status) and regarding subjective ones (e.g., subjective evaluation of one's career) has been high for many years. One main strand of research concerns what predicts success. The present research addresses the influence on career success of two well-known individual difference variables, namely self-efficacy beliefs and personal goals. Self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1986, 1997) and personal goals (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Little, 1983; Locke & Latham, 2002) are important constructs in socio-cognitive models of career interests and performance (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). There is considerable research on the influence of self-efficacy and of personal goals on task performance as well as on job performance (e.g., Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). There are also findings on self-efficacy and goals influencing early phases of an individual's career choice (e.g., Betz & Hackett, 2006). However, there is almost no research on the influence these variables have on career success conceptualized as the objective and subjective outcomes an individual receives in his/her career. A recent meta-analysis on determinants and correlates of career success (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005) listed not a single study on this topic. The aim of the present study is to close this research gap. We will present findings on the impact that self-efficacy beliefs (i.e., occupational self-efficacy) and personal occupational goals (i.e., career-advancement goals) have on career outcomes measured both on an objective level (salary, hierarchical status) and on a subjective level (career satisfaction).

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2. Self-efficacy and personal goals

Self-efficacy is defined as individuals' beliefs about their capability to perform some behavior or to meet a standard. Individuals with high self-efficacy beliefs set higher goals for themselves, put in more effort, and persist longer on a difficult task (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1997). Generalized self-efficacy can be distinguished from more domain-specific self-efficacy. *Personal goals* (Little, 1983) are aims of an action (Locke & Latham, 2002) or internally represented desired states (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). They are assumed to influence outcomes by directing attention, mobilizing effort, affecting persistence, and structuring behavior. They allow long-term orientation and regulation of one's actions. According to socio-cognitive theorizing (Brown, Jones, & Leigh, 2005) both self-efficacy beliefs and goals are determinants of successful actions.

3. Career success

Career success is defined as "the positive psychological or work-related outcomes or achievements one accumulates as a result of work experiences" (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999, p. 417). A conceptual distinction between so-called objective and subjective measures of career success is very frequently made. Criteria of *objective success* include salary, salary growth, promotions, or hierarchical status. Criteria of *subjective success* are, for instance, career satisfaction, comparative judgments, or job satisfaction (for discussions see Arnold & Cohen, 2008). Many career researchers argue that it is important to assess both aspects because the meaning of a career can only be understood if different criteria are taken into account (e.g., Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Heslin, 2005). Objective and subjective measures correlate positively, but the correlations are only moderate. Recent meta-analyses have revealed correlations not higher than .30 (Dette, Abele, & Renner, 2004; Ng et al., 2005). There are also findings suggesting that the predictors of objective career success differ from the predictors of subjective success and that even within different facets of objective and subjective success predictors differ. Ng et al. (2005), for instance, argue that individual difference variables account more for subjective parameters than for objective ones.

4. Influence of self-efficacy and goals on career success

Day and Allen (2004) reported positive correlations between municipal employees' career self-efficacy, current salary, and subjective career success (similarly Valcour & Ladge, 2008). Kim, Mone, and Kim (2008) reported that Korean employees' self-efficacy correlate positively with salary. In contrast, Lubbers, Loughlin, and Zweig (2005) found no association between job self-efficacy and hourly wage. Saks (1995) showed that task-related self-efficacy of newly hired entry-level accountants had a positive effect on job satisfaction 10 months later (similarly, Higgins, Dobrow, & Chandler, 2008 on subjective career success). Frieze, Olson, Murrell, and Selvan (2006) found that MBA graduates' materialistic work values (e.g., making a lot of money) predicted salary 26 years later. Hence, three cross-sectional studies suggest an influence of self-efficacy on salary (Day & Allen, 2004; Kim et al., 2008; Valcour & Ladge, 2008), another study suggests no influence on salary (Lubbers et al., 2005). Two longitudinal studies reveal an influence of self-efficacy on job satisfaction or perceived career success (Higgins et al., 2008; Saks, 1995). One study suggests a longitudinal effect of materialistic goals on salary (Frieze et al., 2006). None of these studies looked at both self-efficacy and goals.

5. Present research

In the present research we analyzed the longitudinal influence of occupational self-efficacy and of career-advancement goals on objective success as well as on subjective success across seven years. With regard to self-efficacy beliefs we were concerned with *occupational self-efficacy*. Occupational self-efficacy is the belief in one's capacity and motivation to successfully perform occupational tasks and challenges and to pursue one's occupational career irrespective of the particular field of occupation (Higgins et al., 2008). Occupational self-efficacy is neither a broad measure of generalized self-efficacy nor a very specific measure of particular career interests self-efficacy such as, for instance, occupational confidence themes according to Holland's (1997) RIASEC model (for instance, Betz et al., 2003; Wulff & Steitz, 1996). Occupational self-efficacy rather has an intermediate level of specificity. We chose such a level because research has shown that a medium level of specificity is advantageous in predicting specific outcomes (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001; Pajares, 1996).

Regarding personal occupational goals we were concerned with *career-advancement goals*. These are directed at climbing up the career ladder and at being successful in terms of influence, material gain, and prestige. There were two reasons for choosing this goal content. First, prestige-, power-, and achievement-goals are important elements in the conceptualization of life goals (e.g., Pöhlmann & Brunstein, 1997), and respective career-advancement goals are important elements in the work values literature (Super, 1970; Zytowski, 1994). Second, previous research in the realm of motivational forces has shown that power-related motives and materialistic goals were especially important predictors of high achievement (Frieze et al., 2006; Winter, 1991; Winter, Riggio, Murphy, & Pirozzolo, 2002).

Fig. 1 depicts our hypotheses, theoretical model, and empirical approach. We operationalized objective career success as salary and hierarchical status and we operationalized subjective success as career satisfaction. At time 1, immediately after the participants' graduated, we assessed occupational self-efficacy and career-advancement goals. We measured objective career success after 36 months of professional experience and again after 85 months of professional experience. Career satisfaction was measured once after 85 months of professional experience.

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