

Adapting Vocational Psychology to Cope with Change

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The article highlights the interdisciplinary theoretical and empirical tradition of vocational psychology as a strength, the slowness in responding to the impact of technology on work as a weakness, while developments in technology provide opportunities for future research and careers interventions, and a possible drift away from psychology is presented as a threat. Strategic issues include implications of having mapped the human genome and the next generation of functional genomics research, change and transfer, development of career programs drawing on goal setting and metacognitive skills, virtual work organizations, and an increased emphasis on time as a variable in research. © 2001 Academic Press

The field of vocational psychology occurs at the intersection between psychology and several other discipline areas, including sociology, economics, education, industrial relations, and human resource management. Vocational psychology is a more pronounced specialization within the United States than elsewhere, in part because of the population base in the United States and the publication of *Journal of Vocational Behavior* there. In Europe, vocational psychology falls within the general umbrella of work and organizational psychology, while elsewhere in the world research on career development tends to be subsumed under an educational or Human Resource Management framework. This article uses the SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) to help suggest strategic areas where vocational psychology might develop and adapt to cope with the many science and technology-related changes associated with the subject matter of its domain.

A SWOT ANALYSIS

Strengths

There are several major strengths that have arisen from the specialization of vocational psychology in the United States, and these strengths have migrated to other parts of the world. Despite the clearer distinction between vocational psychology and industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology, the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* has always covered those areas of I/O psychology that are relevant to

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an individual perspective on work and organizations. This policy has ensured at least some awareness of developments in I/O psychology as they affect individuals who have to manage their careers within the changing context of work and its organization. For example, when there was considerable debate on the role of “g” in selection, the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* organized a special issue on this topic (Gottfredson, 1986). Similarly, the organizing structure provided by the Five Factor Model of personality for the validation of personality measures in selection (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Siebert & Kraimer, 2001) has also been used within areas of vocational psychology. Areas of common interest to organizational psychology and vocational psychology include topics such as managerial career advancement (Tharenou, 1997), sexual harassment (O’Leary-Kelly, Paetzold, & Griffin, 2000; Wayne, 2000), work and family (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Parasuraman, Purohit, & Godshalk, 1996), and equity and justice in the workplace (Blau, Lenneman, Brooks, & Hoover, 1992; Lee, 1995).

Vocational psychology has been responsive to needs within society. For example, during the 1980s and early 1990s vocational psychologists addressed issues associated with unemployment and the transition from school to work. Several specialist conferences have been organized around relevant themes. More recently it has attended to cultural differences and minority group careers.

Perhaps the greatest strength of vocational psychology as evidenced in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* has been its emphasis on theoretically based approaches, with a strong empirical tradition. Vocational psychology has a long and proud theoretical history and hence has been an excellent way of teaching students the value of theory. Osipow’s text books, including the most recent edition (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996), have always provided a good structure for studying theory, evaluating the adequacy of the theory from first principles, classifying theories in various ways, and then subjecting them to empirical test. Brown and Brooks (1996) have added to this tradition by including practical cases as a basis for elaborating the major career development theories. The combination of sophisticated person–environment fit theories such as the Minnesota Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis, 1994; Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), with strong developmental overlays (e.g., Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Super, 1994), will continue to provide a useful structure for teaching career theories.

Weaknesses

Some of the weaknesses shown within vocational psychology include the slowness to embrace information technology for research and the lag in any major effort to understand the impact of information technology on work and its organization and hence on careers. In recent years this lapse has been redressed, but prior to that many of the traditional career models appeared irrelevant to part-time and insecure work that was all many people of all ages could hope to attain.

Although interests and values remain an important component of understanding work motivation and satisfaction, vocational psychologists could have benefited

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