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## Helping students make progress in their careers: An attribute analysis of effective vs ineffective student development plans



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### ABSTRACT

Development planning has been promoted as a useful pedagogical tool for leadership and career development beyond the classroom. In this paper, we identify the attributes of student development plans that are associated with proactive effort and significant progress *after* the assignment and the course are over. This study examines outcomes for 84 MBA students asked to write about their experience 18 months after completing a mandatory course-based development plan. Using content analysis we were able to compare the students' self-described career development progress against their original plans, and discern patterns among those students who subsequently made a high degree of self-reported progress versus those who showed little progress. We found that high levels of self-reported progress were associated with development plans that exhibited clear goals, thoughtful self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses, specific, realistic action steps, and an insightful understanding of the political and organizational challenges of implementing the plan. Effectiveness in career management over time appears associated with students' sense of personal agency regarding their career. The implications of this research for MBA faculty and career services are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Management educators have been encouraged to support career and leadership development beyond the classroom through the use of self-reflection and development planning (Benjamin & O'Reilly, 2011; Nesbit, 2012; Petriglieri, Wood, & Petriglieri, 2011). Indeed, masters' level students have been found to readily identify their development needs connected to employability when engaged in a personal development planning program (Baker et al., 2015). Some business schools have strategically included development planning in their core MBA curricula or career services initiatives to encourage students to

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proactively pursue activities that will likely help them achieve success after graduating (Amundson, 2013; Boyatzis & Saatchioglu, 2008).

Yet the use of development planning raises a number of significant questions. Is it reasonable to assume that a development plan will actually encourage useful action on the part of students after the course is over, or is this wishful thinking? How can an instructor tell the difference between development plans that will likely spur proactivity from those that will not? What are the implications of the use of development planning exercises for faculty and their institutions?

This paper describes our attempts to address these questions. Specifically, we investigated the attributes of development plans from students who made significant progress toward their development goals after the completion of a core course and compared those with attributes of plans from students who subsequently made little progress after the course. Three of the four authors teach a required course on talent management for MBA students. As part of the course, we engage students in a half-semester development planning process, employing a mix of career and behavioral assessments, 360-degree feedback, peer coaching, and journaling to help students understand their professional selves in context. The course provides a development planning approach (within the larger framework of talent management) in which students are asked to define career interests, identify strengths and weaknesses, and explore development opportunities. The major deliverable is a 10-page professional development plan.

We conducted this study with students enrolled in one of our part-time MBA programs. Eighteen months after submitting their professional development plan and completing our course, our colleagues in a subsequent required course asked students to write a self-reflection paper evaluating progress against their development plan. Using content analysis techniques, we were able to compare the students' experience in trying to implement their plans against their original intentions, and discern patterns among those students who subsequently made a high degree of self-reported progress versus those who evidenced low progress. Before describing the study and the results, we will first explore the background literature relevant to development planning in general and our research questions in particular.

## 2. Background

In the context of management education, development planning is a sequence of activities in which students 1) identify short or long-term career goals, 2) seek feedback and reflect on their current knowledge, skills and abilities, 3) define development goals in pursuit of their career objectives, 4) identify opportunities to gain knowledge and refine needed skills, and 5) ultimately create a specific, feasible plan to help them acquire the knowledge, ability, experience, and support required to achieve their career ambitions (Aryee & Debrah, 1992; Boyatzis, Cowen, & Kolb, 1995; Frese & Zapf, 1994; Hall, 1986). The development plan is the written outcome of the development planning process (Kaye, 2010; Wagner, 2010), and has been alternatively called a learning plan (Boyatzis, Stubbs, & Taylor, 2002), personal strategic plan (Duffus, 2004), personal action plan (Berggren & Soderlund, 2011), learning agenda (Boyatzis, 2004), or learning contract (Knowles, 1989).

From a pedagogical standpoint, the use of development planning is based on the concepts of self-directed learning (Boyatzis, 2004; Kolb & Boyatzis, 1970), intentional behavior change (Boyatzis, 2006), adult learning (Knowles, 1989), action regulation theory (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Raabe, Frese, & Beehr, 2007) and goal setting (Locke & Latham, 2002). All support the supposition that individuals are more likely to achieve meaningful change in their work lives and careers if they reflect upon their ideal (desired) and real (current) selves and create a set of personal goals and tactics to either change their ideal self, real self, or both (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006; Boyatzis, 2004). At its best, development planning encourages individuals to reflect on who they are and what they want, helping them create a personal vision of career success and a plan for achieving that vision that is aligned with their needs, values and motivation (Schein, 1996; Stringer & Cheloha, 2003).

Development planning is more likely to engage the participant when developmental targets are chosen voluntarily and reflect the individual's more deeply held ambitions or areas of curiosity (Clardy, 2002). Motivation for engaging in development planning is also strengthened if one has an awareness of the linkages between one's strengths and weaknesses and one's personal goals (Stringer & Cheloha, 2003). Finally, engagement in a planning process is also aided when there is help and support available from others, particularly in the form of feedback on strengths and weaknesses and advice regarding development goals and strategies (Boyatzis et al., 2002; Schein, 1996).

While there is ample support for the power of goal-setting to stimulate action and improve performance (Locke & Latham, 2002; Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2009), there is also growing empirical support for the value of development planning. Raabe et al. (2007) created an employee development program that included career goal exploration, 360° feedback on key competencies, and the eventual creation of a personal development plan that was critiqued by fellow participants. They found that participation in the program led to higher plan quality and subsequently more proactive career self-management behaviors, leading to more extensive plan implementation, quicker job transition speed, and increased career satisfaction (Raabe et al., 2007). Other researchers also have found a relationship between individual career planning and job satisfaction (Kayalar & Özmutaf, 2009), especially if those plans are aligned with the organization's goals (Granrose & Portwood, 1987). In an executive education context, a study by the Corporate Leadership Council among 8000 managers showed that having a development plan was among the two most influential interventions for leadership development that organizations could make in managing talent (2001).

In a more traditional academic setting, Richard Boyatzis and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University pioneered the use of development planning in MBA core curricula (Boyatzis, 1994; Boyatzis et al., 1995). For more than 20 years all MBA students at their institution have taken a course entitled "Leadership Assessment and Development" that engages students in

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