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Upward career mobility: The fit and marketability routes

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# Upward career mobility

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## *The fit and marketability routes*

### Career success and its impact

Having a successful career has significant implications for both individuals and organizations alike. Positive effects on people's health, happiness and longevity have been partly attributed to achievements in the workplace. And employees who flourish in their roles play a major part in a company's potential for growth and prosperity. It therefore makes sense to try and ascertain the factors which make career success more likely to occur.

Success in this context can be measured in objective or subjective terms. Professional attainments reflected in promotions, status and salary levels are common indicators of objective career success. With the subjective form, it is internal beliefs about work achievements and their implications for future opportunities that are most relevant.

Contrasting perspectives exist about what is likely to determine career success. In one camp are those who believe that some people are effectively singled-out and fast-tracked into prominent roles within their firm. This seems the archetypal case of who rather than what someone knows being most important. Another prominent view holds that career progress is decided on merit. People compete with others and choice is ultimately based on degrees of education, skills and relevant work experience.

### Why organizational fit is important

The first mention of these approaches to career success is termed the "sponsored-mobility model". At its core is the practice whereby organizational leaders earmark certain employees to advance and eventually become part of their group. In contrast, others are not granted this privileged status. Succeeding in their career arguably then becomes a likelier outcome for the chosen individuals. They will typically enjoy sponsorship and easier access to a range of training and support mechanisms to aid their development and upward progression in the firm.

But, why do some people get selected at the expense of others? This is an obvious question to ask. A feasible assumption is that influential leaders identify certain individuals as having the greatest scope for development. That is probably only half the story though. Ascertaining that someone is compatible with the organization is perhaps regarded as even more significant. The notion of "fit" is a well-researched concept that in this case reflects similarity between a firm's values and those of the individual concerned. Mutual attraction is heightened, as increased perceptions of fit provide indication that values are shared. As a result, the individual is better positioned to be subsequently placed into the elite group and enjoy opportunities seemingly inherent to this position.

People feel more comfortable when engaging with those whose characteristics and values closely mirror their own. Therefore, a perception of strong fit with an organization also implies that a person will similarly relate to its members. That being the case, there should be a greater probability of receiving sponsorship from the firm in the shape of preferential treatment and support. A notable consequence is that factors pertaining to fit and sponsorship should positively impact on subjective career success.

### Advancement through merit

Donald Kendall once remarked that only in a dictionary does success come before work. Good old-fashioned endeavor is clearly held in higher regard than privilege by the former Pepsi Cola CEO. This outlook reflects a different approach to career success and is referred to as the “contest-mobility model”.

Upward mobility from this perspective is less about selection bias and more about merit. People advance in their careers by differentiating themselves from others through competition. Factors relating to education and specific employment roles are the most accurate predictors of success.

This system enables a more level playing-field in that everyone is able to compete. Aptitude is important and reflected in skills, personal qualities, achievements and work performance. Promoting individuals demonstrating these capabilities would typically be justified by the assumption that they are likely to make a positive contribution in an advanced role and consequently add greater value to the firm.

Being able to boast requisite capabilities, qualifications and track record of achievements is extremely important to any individual. Given these circumstances, a person will be likely to believe that he or she has currency with other employers. This route to career success advocates that proficiency and the acquisition of key competencies will increase their attractiveness in the labor market. Belief that they are marketable externally should thus favorably influence subjective career success. This can be seen as human capital which people can exploit to either secure a promotion within their current firm or obtain a better position in a different company. However, some debate remains as to whether external marketability reflects career success rather than predicts it.

Both perspectives on career success are clearly still relevant. Individuals and company leaders would be advised to ascertain the degree of person – organization fit at the outset, preferably before employment is taken up. Indications of how their values compare with the firm’s culture can be significant when people measure their level of subjective career success later on.

Some appreciation of the potential value offered by diversity can also work to the company’s advantage. Smarter leaders would undoubtedly recognize the shortcomings of a policy whereby recruitment is limited to those indicating high compatibility with organization values. While such employees are obviously important, a need likewise exists to attract other individuals with different qualities and attributes that serve to complement existing ones.

It can be reasonably assumed that people who have stronger perceptions of subjective career success will be more enthusiastic and positive toward their work. Emphasizing the degree of fit provides the means for companies to enhance these perceptions. A similar

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outcome can be achieved through communications which offer positive feedback that acknowledges the employee's internal and external marketability.

### Comment

The review is based on: "Career success: fit or marketability?" by Haines *et al.* (2014). The authors present a detailed analysis of two different perspectives on career success. They suggest that those deemed to indicate close fit with organizational values are likelier to obtain sponsorship from their firm and thus succeed on the basis of securing that advantage. It is likewise mooted that development of key qualities can also facilitate upward mobility for others because the growth in their human capital makes them more marketable both within and outside the organization.

### Reference

Haines, V.Y., Hamouche, S. and Saba, T. (2014), "Career success: fit or marketability?", *Career Development International*, Vol. 19 No. 7, pp. 779-793.

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