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Sophie Hennekam

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# Competencies of older workers and its influence on career success and job satisfaction

Sophie Hennekam

*ESC La Rochelle School of Business, La Rochelle, France and  
IRGO, University of Bordeaux, Bordeaux, France*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of the competencies motivation, integrity and social skills on both intrinsic and extrinsic career success.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In total, 1,112 individuals aged 45 or above registered at a job agency specialized in older employees in the Netherlands filled out a survey. The results were analyzed using multiple regression.

**Findings** – The three competencies had a positive relationship with intrinsic career success (job satisfaction). Motivation and social skills were also positively related to extrinsic career success, while integrity was unrelated.

**Originality/value** – The influence of competencies on career success of older workers has received only little attention from researchers.

**Keywords** Skills, Career development, Motivation, Job satisfaction, Integrity

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The population is aging and older workers are becoming a substantial part of the labor force (OECD, 2011). Many studies have been conducted about how to retain older workers or what makes older workers extend their working lives (Buyens *et al.*, 2009). However, much less is known about what actually influences the career success of older workers (Robson *et al.*, 2006). Career success is a well-studied topic in management research, but previous research mainly focussed on younger or middle-aged workers (Bridgstock, 2011) and older workers have received only very limited attention (Bown-Wilson and Parry, 2013). This is important, because competencies change with age (Reeve *et al.*, 2012) and their influence on both components of career success as well. Furthermore, while technical skills were the only skills necessary for career success in the past, nowadays the importance of soft skills is increasingly being acknowledged (James and James, 2004). One study found that 85 percent of long-term job success depends on soft skills, while only 15 percent is dependent on technical knowledge (John, 2009).

Knowledge and skills have been studied little in relation to career success and job satisfaction. However, careers are increasingly boundaryless, with workers experiencing many changes in terms of their activities, positions, organizations or sector (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). As such, it can be argued that skills or competencies, compared to knowledge and education, are increasingly important in order to be able to deal with those changes.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in two ways: first of all, it looks at the competencies motivation, social skills and integrity and their relationship with extrinsic career success as well as job satisfaction among older workers by the use of the human capital theory. It thus adds to the literature on competencies and



individual outcomes. These competencies have been addressed only to a limited extent in previous studies (Bridgstock, 2009, 2011; Kong *et al.*, 2012; Kuijpers *et al.*, 2006). Although motivation has been studied to a great extent, social skills is a less well-researched topic and integrity has been nearly neglected in academic research on older workers. It has been argued that a more specific understanding of which competencies are actually relevant for career development and thus career success is necessary (Kuijpers *et al.*, 2006).

Second, it looks at a specific population, namely older workers. While stereotypical assumptions and attitudes regarding older workers have been studied extensively (Loretto and White, 2006; Posthuma and Campion, 2009), their actual competencies and how they relate to their success and satisfaction has been mentioned as a point for future studies (De Grip *et al.*, 2009; Wang, 2013). The global share of people aged 60 years or over increased from 9.2 percent, in 1990, to 11.7 percent, in 2013, and is expected to reach 21.1 percent by 2050 (United Nations, 2013), so more research on how to retain this group of workers is justified. The three competencies under study have been argued to be especially relevant for older workers (Cunningham and Sweet, 2009; Stamov-Roßnagel and Hertel, 2010).

We will start with our theoretical framework and an overview of the existing literature, leading to our hypotheses. We will then present the methodology, move on to the findings and will end with a discussion and conclusion where the practical implications and avenues for further research will be outlined.

### Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework in this study is the human capital theory (Becker, 1964). This theoretical framework was chosen, since we argue that one's human capital is increasingly important in the boundaryless career era. What makes workers successful and satisfied at work is related to what individuals possess in terms of knowledge, experience or skills. According to the human capital view, organizations distribute rewards to their members according to their contributions. The ability to contribute to an organization depends on having relevant competencies, which can be acquired in various ways. This view implicitly assumes that individuals compete for the rewards available in organizations, and some are more successful than others (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Most research linking human capital to individual or organizational outcomes have focussed on knowledge, skill, experience and/or education (Ployhart and Moliterno, 2011). Although many researchers believe that education is the most important component of human capital (McArdle *et al.*, 2007), evidence suggests that the relationship between educational achievement and career success is only modest (Ng *et al.*, 2005). Ng *et al.* (2005) found that indicators of educational achievement correlated modestly but positively with subsequent financial success ( $r = 0.21$ ). Thus, although education is reliably associated with career success, the effects are relatively small; the amount of unexplained variance suggests that other factors may also be important. This study does not look at the well-studied dimension of education, but examines competencies that are especially relevant to older workers. We look at competencies, an under-studied aspect of the human capital theory that is increasingly important in the changing work environment where individuals have to constantly develop themselves and keep their knowledge and competencies up-to-date in order to stay employable and attractive in the labor market, thereby extending our knowledge of this theoretical framework.

## Literature review

### *Career success*

Career success can be defined as the real or perceived achievements individuals have accumulated as a result of their work experiences (Judge *et al.*, 1995). Although most research has focussed on extrinsic indicators of career success, like salary or position in the organization, the attention is shifting toward different and more subjective measures of career success (Ng *et al.*, 2005). It has been argued that the subjective interpretation of one's career status, instead of the objective way of assessing this, is necessary since objective career success neglects valuable subjective outcomes like the development of new skills, work-life balance, challenge and a sense of achievement (Bridgstock, 2009; Heslin, 2005).

In line with previous studies (Judge *et al.*, 1995; Seibert *et al.*, 2001), this study also distinguishes between extrinsic career success (income) and intrinsic career success (job satisfaction). Extrinsic success is relatively easy to measure, fairly objective and usually consists of visible outcomes like pay or position. Subjective or intrinsic career success is broadly defined as "an individual's reactions to his or her unfolding career experiences" (Heslin, 2005, p. 114). Meta-analyses revealed that correlations between objective and subjective success are not higher than 0.30 (Ng and Feldman, 2010), but measure both important elements of career success and can therefore be measured as two distinct variables. The weak correlation between the two components of career success stresses the importance to distinguish between the two. Previous studies have examined the differences and similarities in antecedents and consequences of these concepts and this study follows this line of research by looking at the influence of several competencies on both aspects of career success. Intrinsic career success has been most commonly operationalized as either job or career satisfaction (Heslin, 2005).

### *Antecedents of career success*

The antecedents of career success have received a lot of attention from researchers (Boudreau and Boswell, 2001), with much of it devoted to personality traits (Judge *et al.*, 1999). A less well-studied area is the impact of ability, skills and competencies in relation to career success (Bridgstock, 2009, 2011; Kong *et al.*, 2012; Kuijpers *et al.*, 2006). Several studies have been conducted about the relationship between career competencies and job satisfaction, some of them using the human capital theory as their theoretical framework. Career planning (Ng *et al.*, 2005), networking (Seibert *et al.*, 2001; Kuijpers and Scheerens, 2006), organizational support (Ballout, 2007) and career control (Kuijpers and Scheerens, 2006) all have been found to have a positive relationship with career satisfaction and often also with extrinsic career success. Furthermore, positive career attitudes, like taking initiative and honesty, can also be considered an ability (De Vos and Soens, 2008) and have been found to determine career success (Beheshtifar, 2011; De Vos and Soens, 2008).

### *Job satisfaction*

The most frequently studied variable in organizational research is job satisfaction (Wright, 2006). Overall job satisfaction can be thought of as one's general attitude toward his or her job (Spector, 1997) and has been considered to be crucial for organizational success. Satisfied employees work with more commitment and exhibit higher retention rates and higher productivity. Higher levels of job satisfaction tend to lead to lower levels of absenteeism and better mental and physical health (Jex and Britt, 2008). On the other

hand, low job satisfaction is associated with low performance, limited service quality, and reduced customer satisfaction (Batt and Moynihan, 2002), higher staff turnover (Shields and Ward, 2001) and can cause health complaints (Waddell, 2004).

Job satisfaction is also understood in terms of its relationship with other key factors of employees like general well-being, stress, control at work, home-work balance and working conditions (Harrison *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, it has been found to be positively related to motivation and life satisfaction (Kinnicki *et al.*, 2002).

It is important to study both extrinsic and intrinsic career success. While common sense would expect a positive relationship between job satisfaction and performance, leading to higher extrinsic career success, such a direct relationship between satisfaction and performance was not found by previous studies. It has been argued that the opposite can actually be the case: an individual who gets to high performances consequently is going to be satisfied by his/her work (Judge *et al.*, 2010). For this reason, both job satisfaction and extrinsic career success are studied separately in this study.

#### *Antecedents of job satisfaction*

Although predictors of job satisfaction are well documented, to date little is known about the impact of workers' competencies (De Grip *et al.*, 2009). It has been argued that workers' competencies may have both negative and positive effects (Gordon and Arvey, 1975). It has been argued that adequate competencies are considered essential to a good job performance, which is conducive to higher satisfaction (Ganzach, 2003). Moreover, De Grip *et al.* (2009) showed that the shift from more traditional knowledge-based competencies toward more soft skills like communication skills can affect job satisfaction.

#### *Competencies*

Competencies are knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics that are needed for effective performance in the jobs in question (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2002; Schippmann *et al.*, 2000). The collection of such competencies are called competency modeling and is a way to get organizations pay attention to job-related information and employee skills in the management of employees (Campion *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, such models are used to distinguish top performers from average performers (Olesen *et al.*, 2007) and also inform managers whom to reward, promote or develop (Schippmann *et al.*, 2000). Social skills, integrity and motivation can all be considered competencies, since they can be needed to perform effectively in a given job.

Moreover, research has identified mainly three classes of competencies that influence career success: knowing why, knowing how and knowing whom (Eby *et al.*, 2003). The knowing why questions relates to career motivation as well as understanding oneself (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). Both motivation and integrity are thus competencies belonging to this category. The second career competency is knowing whom and refers to career-related networks, contacts and relationships (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). The social skills fall thus under this category. The category knowing how has not been represented in this study. The three competencies under study will now be discussed briefly below.

#### *Social skills*

Social skills are interpersonal qualities and personal attributes that one possesses (Robles, 2012) and encompasses many different skills like communication (John, 2009), empathy and being collaborative and motivated (Robles, 2012). Social skills have to our

knowledge never been studied in relationship with career success. However, related skills like networking (Seibert *et al.*, 2001; Kuijpers and Scheerens, 2006), social capital (Ng *et al.*, 2005) and organizational socialization (King *et al.*, 2005) were found to be positively related to career success. It has been argued that organizational socialization enhances employees' work-related outcomes such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, social relations, performance and reduced intentions to quit (King *et al.*, 2005). For instance, Chow (2002) showed that a high perception of organizational support increased the effectiveness of developmental activities, which contributed to employees' career success. Subsequently, Claes *et al.* (2006) found that organizational socialization was related to work outcomes, like job satisfaction. Also, Cunningham and Sweet (2009) found that social skills are frequently used in order to adapt successfully during their careers. Social skills are part of one's human capital and the human capital theory states that those individuals with relevant competencies will receive more rewards from the organization, for example in the form of a promotion leading to higher career success or in the form of a preferred work schedule, leading to higher job satisfaction. Based on this theory, the following hypotheses are presented:

- H1a.* Social skills have a positive relationship with job satisfaction of older workers.
- H1b.* Social skills have a positive relationship with extrinsic career success of older workers.

### *Integrity*

Integrity has received little attention from researchers as such (Beheshtifar, 2011; De Vos and Soens, 2008), but it can be considered a positive career attitude, like trust that has been found to have a positive relationship with career success (Guohong, 2010). Integrity at work is more than just having principles and values (Becker, 1998). It is broadly defined as a "quality of moral self-governance" at the individual and collective level (Fine, 2012) and is considered to be an essential requirement for the successful performance of both employees and organizations (Fine, 2012). The construct of integrity is related to other constructs such as trust, credibility, and psychological contracts, but is generally considered an antecedent of trust and credibility (Davis and Rothstein, 2006). In previous studies, behavioral integrity was positively related to job satisfaction, job engagement, health, and life satisfaction and negatively to stress, turnover likelihood, absenteeism and work-to-family conflict (Prottas, 2013). However, these studies looked at how employees perceived the integrity of their manager and not the integrity as a personal characteristic. Integrity is a competency or characteristic that is generally thought to be more prevalent among older workers (McGregor and Gray, 2002), based on stereotypical attitudes and assumptions. It is likely that being a person with integrity, someone that people can trust and can build on is a characteristic that attracts colleagues, leading to a solid social network at the workplace and pleasant interactions with others. As a result, it is expected that individuals that score high on integrity also experience job satisfaction. This would also be in line with a previous study that found that ethical values were associated with increased job satisfaction in a sample of employees in the USA (Valentine *et al.*, 2011). On the other hand, it is not sure that this will lead to extrinsic career success, since individuals that are perceived as having integrity are not necessarily visible and might not display enough political behavior to move up the hierarchical ladder. So while the human capital theory predicts that integrity is a valued competency, it is not an easily visible aspect of one's human capital and might

therefore be overruled by other, more visible dimensions when it comes to tangible returns on the side of the organization. This leads to the following hypotheses:

*H2a.* Integrity has a positive relationship with job satisfaction of older workers.

*H2b.* Integrity is unrelated to extrinsic career success of older workers.

### *Motivation*

The third competency studied here is motivation. Work motivation has been defined as a set of energetic forces that originate both within as well as beyond an individual's being, to initiate work-related behaviour, and to determine its form, direction, intensity and duration (Pinder, 2008, p. 11). This definition includes both intrinsic and extrinsic work motivation. Despite being perceived as experienced (Gaillard and Desmette, 2007), older workers are predominantly subject to negative assumptions and prejudices about their motivation and ability to work, learn and develop. However, in previous studies that focussed on younger or middle-aged workers, motivation has been found to be positively related to both intrinsic and extrinsic career success (Bridgstock, 2011). They argue that intrinsic motivation can influence career self-management and subsequent subjective and objective career success (Quigly and Tymon, 2006). In the same line and in accordance with the human capital theory, proactive behavior was found to be important (Ballout, 2007). Individuals who engage proactively in learning experiences will be most likely to possess managerial competencies which are valuable for their managerial career advancement. According to Aryee *et al.* (1996), individuals who engage proactively in career strategies will have a certain control over their career choice and progression, and will be most likely to achieve career success. Furthermore, Nabi (1999) suggested that career strategies act as signals to higher management and consequently increase employees' power and visibility. Positive relationships with career success were also found for career aspirations (Rasdi *et al.*, 2009) and organizational socialization (King *et al.*, 2005). It is expected that motivation encompasses the above-mentioned dimensions. Based on the human capital theory we expect to find a positive relationship with both job satisfaction and career success:

*H3a.* Motivation has a positive relationship with job satisfaction of older workers.

*H3b.* Motivation has a positive relationship with extrinsic career success of older workers.

## **Methodology**

### *Sample*

The sample consists of 1,112 workers aged 45 or above, all subscribed to a job agency specialized in older workers in the Netherlands. This sample was drawn from the full database of the job agency: all workers subscribed to this specialized agency. The agency has a total of 4,800 members. All members of the job agency received the request to participate to the study and they decided themselves if they wanted to participate. In total, 1,112 fully filled out surveys were obtained. In our sample, 77 percent were unemployed, 23 percent were working. The average age of the sample was 59.5 years with a standard deviation of 6.38 and a range from 45 to 84. In total, 68 percent were male, 32 percent female. Regarding educational background, 47 percent had a Higher Vocational Education or University-level, 32 percent had an Intermediate Vocational Education, 20 percent a Lower General Secondary Education

and 1 percent had finished Elementary School. 72 percent were not yet retired, 2 percent had a pre-pension and 26 percent were retired. Retired workers were defined as individuals no longer active in the workforce, un-retired participants were either working full-time or part-time but did not receive any pension benefits yet and workers with a pre-pension have been defined in the Netherlands as individuals who have opted for an individual pension plan during their working lives that allows them to retire before the legal retirement age. However, during their pre-pension, individuals can simultaneously derive income from paid work until they reach the legal retirement age (Statistics Netherlands, 2012). The individuals that were (pre)retired were so for an average of 3.5 years. The participants who were unemployed or retired (but looking to re-enter the workforce) were asked to answer the survey based on their last position. In total, 57 percent of the participants worked full-time. Full-time is defined here as working 40 hours per week or more. In all, 43 percent reported to work part-time, which is between 15 and 39 hours a week (Statistics Netherlands, 2014). The characteristics of the sample are displayed in Table I.

### *Procedures*

An online survey measuring extrinsic and intrinsic career success and the competencies social skills, integrity and motivation was constructed. A pilot study was conducted and some small adaptations in the formulation of certain items as well as the layout were made. Then the survey was put online and an e-mail was sent out to all members of the job agency, including the ones that were at the time of the survey unemployed. The e-mail contained an explanation of the study and a link to the survey. The ones that were unemployed at the time of the survey could click on a specific version of the survey that asked the same questions about their last job. Two follow-up e-mails were sent, one after a week and another one after three weeks. In total, 1,112 fully filled out surveys were obtained. Since the agency has 4,800 members, this gives a response rate of 23.2 percent. The data were screened, cleaned and analyzed using multiple regression.

### *Instruments*

All instruments used in this study were previously validated scales. Parallel back-and-forth translation was used to obtain a Dutch version.

We operationalize objective or extrinsic career success as the person's salary, which is the most frequently used measure of objective career success (Ng *et al.*, 2005). We asked the participants to report their annual income (before tax). Self-reported measures are always prone to biases, especially single-item measures. Yet, Podsakoff *et al.* (1986) found that variables which can be reality checked are usually only marginally distorted.

Job satisfaction is defined as "an individual's reactions to his or her unfolding career experiences" (Heslin, 2005). Job satisfaction was measured with the five item scale developed by Greenhaus *et al.* (1990). The internal consistency for this scale was  $\alpha = 0.90$ .

**Table I.**  
Characteristics of  
the sample

	Total	Men	Women	Employed	Unemployed	Un-retired	Pre-pension	Retired	Full-time	Part-time
Number	1,112	756	356	256	856	801	22	289	634	478
%	100	68	32	23	77	72	2	26	57	43



In order to measure integrity the London House Personnel Selection Inventory was used (London House Press, 1992). It consists of 47 items and is the most heavily researched test of this type (Carter *et al.*, 2013). The  $\alpha$  was 0.83.

Work motivation was assessed with one item ("All things considered, how motivated would you say you are for your job?") on a five-point Likert-scale. Previous research showed good reliabilities of single-item measures for this construct (Stamov-Roßnagel and Biemann, 2012). The  $\alpha$  is 0.88.

Interpersonal Communication Assessment Scale was used to measure the social or interpersonal skills of the participants. The scale has been previously validated (Klakovich and Dela Cruz, 2006) and exists of 23 items. The  $\alpha$  reported was 0.94.

Finally, the participants were asked the following demographic information: age, gender, educational level, retirement status (retired, pre-pension, not retired) and work status (employed/unemployed).

## Results

Table II provides the means, standard deviations and correlations of all variables under study. It shows that motivation ( $r = 0.18$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), integrity ( $r = 0.05$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and social skills ( $r = 0.15$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) show a positive relationship with extrinsic career success as well as with job satisfaction: motivation ( $r = 0.20$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), integrity ( $r = 0.12$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and social skills ( $r = 0.16$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). However, the findings regarding integrity should be interpreted with caution as a result of the small correlations for integrity with both intrinsic and extrinsic career success. Although significance is reached, the practical significance of this finding is questionable, making this variable a subject to future studies in order to confirm its importance regarding career success and job satisfaction.

Multiple regression was performed. The results are shown in Table III. We controlled for age, gender, work status (employed or unemployed), retirement status (retired, pre-pension or not retired) and educational background. *H1a* and *H1b* were supported and found the expected positive relationships between social skills and job satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.16$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) as well as extrinsic career success ( $\beta = 0.11$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). The higher the social skills of older workers, the more satisfied he or she is and the higher their career success. *H2a* and *H2b* were also supported by the findings. Integrity and extrinsic career success were indeed found to be unrelated, while it showed the expected positive relationship with job satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.11$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Scoring high on integrity does lead to higher job satisfaction, but does not positively influences someone's income. Finally, both *H3a* and *H3b* are supported, with a positive relationship between motivation and job satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.19$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and extrinsic career success ( $\beta = 0.15$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Older workers who are highly motivated are more satisfied with their jobs or careers and also do better, leading to higher extrinsic career success.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Career success	2.87	0.91				
2. Job satisfaction	3.62	0.78	0.37**			
3. Motivation	4.64	0.35	0.18**	0.20**		
4. Integrity	4.62	0.38	0.05*	0.12*	0.70**	
5. Social skills	4.49	0.41	0.15**	0.16**	0.77**	0.76**

Notes:  $n = 1,112$ . \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table II.**  
Correlation matrix

**Table III.**

Regression analyses

	Extrinsic career success	Job satisfaction
Age	0.06	0.11*
Gender	0.05	0.03
Work status	0.34**	0.37**
Retirement status	0.13**	0.09*
Educational background	0.10*	0.09*
Motivation	0.15**	0.19**
Integrity	0.03	0.11*
Social skills	0.11**	0.16**
$R^2$	0.13**	0.10**
Adjusted $R^2$	0.14**	0.16**

**Notes:**  $n = 1,112$ . \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ 

Because of the high number of unemployed workers in the sample, we also compared those two groups of workers. We found that both extrinsic and intrinsic career success was higher for the group of employed individuals and that this difference was statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). Since all participants in this study are subscribed to a job agency, they are all looking for employment. Only 23 percent of the sample was actually employed at the time of the survey. These workers are likely to be happy to have found work, leading to higher job satisfaction than the unemployed workers who were asked about their job satisfaction in retrospect. The fact that they were asked to report their job satisfaction while no longer being employed is likely to lead to biased findings in the sense that they might have negative feelings about how they ended their last job in the case of being made redundant for example. Regarding extrinsic career success the finding that working individuals score higher here than unemployed ones is not surprising either. People with a low educational and occupational status are both earning less than the average worker and also are more prone to unemployed, short contracts and part-time positions (Millward and Brooke, 2007).

The results are also compared for retirement status. As explained above, there are three categories: working (72 percent), pre-pension (2 percent) and retired (26 percent). The working participants scored highest on extrinsic career success. Seniority pay is prevalent in the Netherlands (Zwick, 2011), older individuals are automatically paid more than younger ones regardless their educational background, skills or knowledge. This leads older workers to be paid quite well at higher ages, leading to higher extrinsic career success compared to individuals who have already withdrawn from the labor market (the retired individuals). Moreover, the retired older workers in this study are possibly a specific group of workers since they have registered at a job agency. In other words, they want to re-enter the workforce possibly out of financial necessity. The employed older workers were also found to be the most satisfied with their job/career. An attrition-effect could explain this finding since those older workers who are dissatisfied with their job or career are likely to have withdrawn from the workplace already. The difference between the working group and the pre-pension/retired group on career success was significant at  $p < 0.01$  level, while it was found to be significant as  $p < 0.05$  level for job satisfaction.

Also the full-time and part-time workers were compared in terms of their intrinsic and extrinsic career success. While extrinsic career success was higher for the full-time working group, which is unsurprising given that their salary is higher ( $p < 0.01$ ), no difference was found on job satisfaction. This is in line with previous studies

(Barling and Gallagher, 1996) that found that what counts is the preferred contract of the individual. Differently stated, part-time workers are only more satisfied if they indeed want to work part-time and vice versa.

Finally, age was found to be positively related to job satisfaction: the older the participant, the more satisfied he or she was with his or her job. And the same was found for educational background that showed positive relationships with both career success and job satisfaction. Table III shows the regression analyses.

## Discussion

This study examined the influence of social skills, integrity and motivation on both intrinsic and extrinsic career success of older workers in the Netherlands by the use of the human capital theory. Multiple regression was used to analyze the 1,112 surveys. It was found that motivation, integrity and social skills all had a positive relationship with job satisfaction: the higher the older workers scored on those competencies, the more satisfied they were with their job. Motivation and social skills were also positively related to extrinsic career success, while integrity was unrelated.

### *Theoretical and practical implications*

The findings have implications for the human capital theory. While most research has focussed on education as the most important aspect of human capital (McArdle *et al.*, 2007; Ployhart and Moliterno, 2011), this study shows that competencies also play an important role. While some previous studies have looked at this dimension of the human capital theory (Ballout, 2007; Ng and Feldman, 2010), our knowledge is still scarce, especially when it comes to how this applies to older workers (Lau and Poutvaara, 2006). Our theoretical contribution is that competencies, an under-studied dimension of the human capital theory, are important not only for younger workers, but also for older workers. Moreover, it is likely that its importance will even increase over time, since careers are no longer linear pathways with individual workers having to deal with ever-changing demands on the side of the organization (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). While knowledge can easily become outdated, skills are more resistant to obsolescence and are therefore a better predictor in terms of someone's career success.

Second, human capital would predict that organizations would invest less in older workers because of the expected lower net returns of such investments for organizations (Neumann and Weiss, 1995). Additionally, institutions favoring early retirement shorten the payback period of human capital investments, in particular that of older employees (Lau and Poutvaara, 2006). However, in the light of the aging population, governments have started to reform pension systems, making early retirement less attractive financially and the need to increase the skills of the older workforce is being acknowledged (Fouarge and Schils, 2009). The human capital theory states that investments in human capital are a way to increase productivity and thereby to enhance employment and income security. Previous empirical studies showed that developing worker's competencies compensates for the depreciation of human capital and increases the employability of employees (Groot and Maassen van den Brink, 2000). These findings go in the same line as the findings obtained in this study that competencies positively influence both job satisfaction and career success of older workers and that developing such competencies can be used as a tool for the retention of older workers.

The findings also have some implications for management practitioners. The population is aging and the share of older workers in the workforce is growing

(OECD, 2011; United Nations, 2013). However, while new rules and regulations on governmental and international level are trying to make older workers extend their working lives, older workers also face many barriers to continue employment (Loretto and White, 2006). Negative stereotypes, assumptions and prejudices about older workers are common and influence how managers interact with older workers. The perception of managers regarding the competencies of an older worker is thus biased by stereotypical attitudes and assumptions. If an organization wants to have more insights about the competencies of older workers, the organization should start with finding an objective way of measuring or observing this. Removing the stereotypical attitudes and assumptions of managers should be acknowledged and dealt with not to distort the observations. For example, previous studies argued that older workers are perceived as being less motivated (Posthuma and Campion, 2009). This preconceived idea could negatively affect their career success because they would get offered fewer challenging projects or promotions, since they assume that older workers have advanced as far as they want in their careers and are not interested in further advancement (Patrickson and Ranzijn, 2005). It is argued that it is often assumed that older employees are simply waiting to retire and that they do not desire a job that requires upgrading their skills and abilities (Boerlijst and Van der Heijden, 2003). However, research has shown that competency development is negatively and directly related to turnover intentions (Paré and Tremblay, 2007) and that employees who perceive higher levels of career growth opportunity extend their careers more (Saba and Guerin, 2005). This can give older managers a sense of fulfillment in their professional life, allowing them to work in a pleasant environment which recognizes their experience and competencies, leading them to retire at a later age (Saba and Guerin, 2005).

While tackling the ageist and stereotypical attitudes and behaviors of managers is important in order to keep the older workforce satisfied as well as longer in the workforce, the individual competencies studied here should also be discussed. While the results regarding integrity seem inconclusive due to low significance levels, social skills seem to be important for older workers. Not only is it argued that this competency is increasingly important in today's workplace (James and James, 2004), it is also a competency that can be developed by the use of training in organizations. Social skills training can be offered to older workers as a way to increase their job satisfaction as well as their career success. Indeed, having good social skills helps to build up enriching and rewarding social relationships and can also be used to be more visible to top management, leading to more career success. While older workers are perceived as being unmotivated (Posthuma and Campion, 2009), motivation was found to have a positive relationship with extrinsic career success in this study. Organizations should thus find out what motivates older workers so that they can reap the benefits from it.

The finding that the three competencies under study have a positive relationship with job satisfaction is important, since job satisfaction is strongly negatively correlated with other important managerial constructs like retirement intentions (Kautonen *et al.*, 2012) and turnover (Chiu and Francesco, 2003) and positively related to job performance (Crossman and Abou-Zaki, 2003).

#### *Limitations and suggestions for future research*

This study has some limitations. First of all, the sample is Dutch. Based on the work of Hofstede (2001), the Netherlands is known to be an individualistic and feminine country where work-life balance is important and where power distance is low, leading to little

hierarchy in organizations. This implies that personal characteristics strongly influence the career success of individuals. More precisely, motivation is important if someone wants to succeed, which is related to the aspect of individualism. Similarly, social skills are indispensable in a feminine country like the Netherlands, so it is not surprising that social skills influence career success in the light of the cultural context of this study. Clearly, the national culture in which this study took place influences the findings, making generalizations to other countries difficult. Still, we expect that the obtained findings are noteworthy and provide valuable clues for future research and cross-validation in different settings and countries.

A second limitation of this study is related to the sample. In this study both employed and unemployed older workers were grouped together. While some additional analyses were conducted to determine if differences exist between those two groups, this is clearly a major drawback that needs to be acknowledged and addressed in future studies. It was found that while the competencies under study indeed had a positive relationship with both intrinsic and extrinsic career success for the working individuals, this was not the case for the unemployed older workers. Future studies should unravel the possible differences in the relationship between competencies on the one hand and extrinsic and intrinsic career success on the other hand.

Third and relatedly, the fact that all older workers were registered at a job agency specialized in older workers is another limitation. It is possible that those workers differ in some aspects from the “average older worker,” especially related to motivation. It is possible that they are more motivated than the average older worker, which influences the findings. It is unlikely, however, that the sample under study differs in terms of their social skills or their integrity compared to all older workers in the Netherlands. A related limitation is the self-selection bias, since the participants who filled out the survey might differ in some important aspects from those who did not return it.

A third limitation concerns the use of surveys. Although this methodological approach allows for testing hypotheses in a statistical way, qualitative research would help to understand the mechanisms that underlie the studied relationships. The use of online surveys adds another issue. It should be acknowledged that an online survey is problematic for the sample under study, since internet connection and use declines with age (Statistics Netherlands, 2007).

A last limitation concerns the cross-sectional design where all variables were measured only once. Future research using a longitudinal design is needed to address the issue of causality, and to pay attention to possible changes in the constructs under study over time.

The limitations outlined above are acknowledged but they do not detract from the significance of the findings. The limitations of the present study merely provide a platform for future research that will be discussed as follows.

We argue that the area of competencies should be studied in more detail by extending the range of competencies as well as by the use of both qualitative research and longitudinal research designs. Although managers and organizations seem to emphasize the importance of skills, competencies and abilities in today’s work environment, this is an under-researched area in management when it comes to older workers and their career success and also an under-researched aspect of the human capital theory. Furthermore, the findings of this study should be cross-validated in other settings and could be compared with workers in other age-groups.

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