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What is This?

The Next Generation of Career Success: Implications for HRD

Kimberly S. McDonald
Linda M. Hite

The problem and the solution. This exploratory qualitative study investigated young professionals' definitions of career success and the strategies they employ to achieve that success. There were three overarching themes that emerged from the data. Two reflect how young professionals perceive career success. They see it as individualistic and as a multidimensional concept that is likely to change throughout their work lives. The third theme, attaining work–life balance, is integral to their definition of career success as well as to their strategies for attaining success. Implications for human resource development are provided.

Keywords: *career success; young professionals; career development; work–life balance*

The past two decades have been characterized as a turbulent career environment. The changing nature of careers (e.g., increasingly boundaryless and protean) and the changing nature of organizations where individuals negotiate their work experiences has compelled researchers and practitioners to reexamine a number of issues and concepts pertaining to careers. Recognizing the dynamic, ever-changing nature of work life, Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao (2001), outlined three issues critical to economic development in the 21st century: the skills gap, U.S. demographics (e.g., Baby Boomers retiring and the labor pool shrinking), and the American workplace. Regarding the last issue she wrote,

Anyone can tell you that this is not our parents' economy. The average 34-year-old has already worked for nine different companies in his or her brief career. Around 10 million people work away from their corporate office at least 3 days a month. As people sort out the new priorities of financial needs and family life, they all face the same new concerns: a career move that leaves behind health care coverage; abandoning pension benefits before they are vested; renegotiating with each new employer the balance between work and home. (para. 9)

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Those individuals likely to be most affected by these issues are commonly labeled “Generation X” (Gen X-ers) and “Millennials” (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Although there is lack of agreement regarding the exact birth years of the generational cohort groups, most Gen X-ers (born between the mid-1960s and early 1980s) are currently in the workforce (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Smola & Sutton, 2002). Besides Baby Boomers, Gen X-ers are the most prevalent group of individuals working today (Smola & Sutton, 2002). The Millennials, often defined as those born between the early 1980s and late 1990s, are just beginning to enter organizations as employees (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). As the Baby Boom generation begins to retire or scale back on their workload (see Callanan & Greenhaus [this issue]), these younger employees become increasingly important in terms of our national and global economy (International Labour Organization, 2006).

Understanding the career needs of these two cohort groups is critical for organizations to effectively function in the 21st century. To create effective career development systems, human resource development (HRD) practitioners and managers need to understand how these individuals define career success and how they plan to achieve success in their careers (Nabi, 2001). This article reports the findings of an exploratory study conducted with a small group of Gen X-ers and Millennials on career success. Specifically, the research focused on young employees’ perceptions of what career success entails, what has influenced their definitions, and what strategies they are employing to achieve success. Implications for HRD practice and future research will be discussed as well.

Literature Review

Young Employees

Recent interest in generational differences and ways to manage individuals within various age groups effectively have resulted in popular press publications, presentations, and workshops on the subject (see, e.g., Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). However, Loughlin and Barling (2001) noted the importance of differentiating this literature from empirical work that needs to be conducted examining the attitudes and behaviors of young workers. Although this is not a comprehensive review of the research, it is crucial to highlight some of the important characteristics of these individuals.

Perhaps the most pervasive research finding regarding young workers is their desire for balance in life (Lewis, Smithson, & Kugelberg, 2002; Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Sturges & Guest, 2004). Although balance is valued by this group of individuals, Sturges and Guest’s research indicated that as the tenure of young employees in an organization increased, so did the number of hours they spent at work. Although these workers were not satisfied with this situation, they appeared to tolerate it to “succeed in the corporate environment” (Sturges & Guest, 2004, p. 17).

This need for balance may in part be shaped by the growing experiences of young workers. Loughlin and Barling (2001), in their review of the literature on young workers, discussed how family, particularly the work experience of parents, has influenced young employees' perceptions of work. Many of these individuals have seen their parents work long hours and suffer through downsizings. As a result, Loughlin and Barling concluded that "they may be less willing to make sacrifices for the sake of their jobs" (p. 545). This may help explain Smola and Sutton's (2002) finding that Gen X-ers were less likely to view their work as the most important aspect of their lives and expressed less loyalty to an organization than Baby Boomers.

A qualitative study conducted with young people (ages 18-30) across five European countries found that this population is concerned about adequate pay and job security, which has resulted in a redefinition of expectations regarding employment and a focus on maintaining their skills to remain employable (Lewis et al., 2002). The authors of this study suggested a "multidimensional" psychological contract that "would then include compliance or some sense of mutual obligation . . . , two-way commitment based on short-term time spans, and compromise and exchange" (p. 84).

Career Development Strategies

In previous articles, we have argued that the changing psychological contract and the move toward the protean and boundaryless career models necessitates that organizations and individuals devise new strategies to develop their careers (see Hite & McDonald [this issue]; McDonald & Hite, 2005). Other scholars have advocated for alternative forms of developmental activities such as informal learning as a means of career development (Conlon, 2004; Powell, Hubschman, & Doran, 2001; van Dijk, 2004). Less traditional and less formalized learning activities may work best given the ever-changing work environments in which these younger individuals are employed. We refer to these activities as "boundary-spanning" and define them as informal learning opportunities occurring both within and outside traditional organizational structures, for example, informal learning activities through work, networks, community-based activities, and alternative forms of mentoring (see McDonald & Hite, 2005, for a complete description).

There appears to be little empirical work linking career development strategies and career success. One study examined the career success orientations of Korean employees and their preferences in terms of career development interventions (Kim, 2005). Differences were found in individuals' career success orientations and their preferences of various career development interventions, leading the author to suggest that organizations develop interventions "in accordance with employees' career orientations" (Kim, 2005, p. 59). The 13 organizational interventions provided as options for these respondents were more

traditional activities such as succession planning, job postings, job rotation, mentoring, and career counseling.

Career Success

The construct “career success” has been addressed frequently in the career literature. Usually the term is discussed from two key perspectives: objective and subjective. Objective career success is described as tangible indicators such as pay, promotions, and job level. Subjective success represents less tangible, personal judgments of one’s career based on criteria deemed important to the individual. This conceptualization might include factors such as work–life balance, career enjoyment, career satisfaction, and career fulfillment (see, e.g., Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Gunz & Heslin, 2005; Heslin, 2005; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Heslin (2003, 2005) also argued that in addition to objective and subjective measures, individuals use self- and other-referent criteria in determining their career success. Self-referent criteria suggest individuals evaluate their success based on their own career goals and standards, whereas other-referent criteria indicates an evaluation based on comparing one’s career with others.

Recent empirical literature has led to a greater understanding of the factors that make up objective and subjective perspectives and the predictors of career success (Arthur et al., 2005; Ng et al., 2005). For example, Eby, Butts, and Lockwood (2003) found personality characteristics such as being a self-starter, being open to new experiences, and having career insight were important in predicting perceived career success. Other related factors were having extensive networks and continually developing one’s skills and learning. The study by Eby et al. is noteworthy in that the sample was younger (mean = 31) than most of the studies done on career success, and it focused on the boundaryless career. The authors concluded that these factors, “‘knowing why,’ ‘knowing whom,’ and ‘knowing how’ are important predictors of success in the boundaryless career” (p. 703).

Few studies have focused specifically on younger employees. One notable exception is Sturges’s (1999) research examining managers’ definitions of career success. She found young male managers (in their 20s and 30s) were more likely to be “Climbers,” those viewing success as receiving promotions and pay increases, whereas older managers (in their 40s) were more likely to be “Influencers,” those concerned with having an impact on their organizations. However, she noted that most managers’ definitions of career success were complex, meaning they were comprised of external, internal, and intangible criteria. One of the conclusions drawn from this study is that organizations need to be cognizant of varying ways individuals define career success. Sturges wrote,

They (organizations) should not assume that managers are a homogenous group with a single set of wants and needs. Career development practices and career paths which do not reflect individuals' values and beliefs are not likely to deliver the levels of commitment and motivation which organizations today require from their managers. (p. 251)

With the exception of Sturges's work, very few studies have used qualitative methods to examine the career success construct. Both Arthur et al. (2005) and Heslin (2005) lament the lack of qualitative research in this area. Arthur et al. write,

Not one of the 68 articles we examined involved listening directly to the research subjects, or even allowing them to elaborate on their own criteria for career success. . . . How can subjective careers be adequately researched when the subjective interpretations of the career actors themselves—apart from their non-verbal responses to a limited set of questionnaire items—are not allowed expression? The answer lies in more qualitative research into the subjective criteria that people bring to their own career situations. (p. 196)

This study responds to two needs identified in the literature. It provides further empirical data regarding young employees' perceptions of career issues and more qualitative information on how individuals define career success, what influences these definitions, and what strategies are being employed to achieve career success. This information can be valuable as HRD develops career development strategies to foster individual growth and organization performance. We also hope this study will serve as an impetus for more qualitative research on career success. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How do young professionals define career success?
2. What influenced their definition of career success?
3. What strategies are young professionals employing to achieve career success as they have defined it?

Methodology

Our desire to capture young professionals' definitions of career success in their own words necessitated a qualitative approach. Focus group discussions were employed to capture younger employees' meanings of career success in their own words and to gather a range of ideas that "uncover factors that influence opinions, behaviors, or motivation" (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 24).

Research participants were recruited from two groups: (a) a local community-based organization dedicated to providing community, professional, and social opportunities for young leaders in the region and (b) graduate-level courses at our university. Krueger (1998) suggests using "purposeful" sampling when conducting focus groups, meaning the sample is selected "based on the purpose of the study" and are relatively "homogenous groups of people with something in common that is relevant to the topic of study" (p. 71). The local leadership group was selected given the strong career development focus of the organization and its age

focus (young professionals in their 20s and 30s). Additional participants were obtained from announcements made by faculty in graduate courses. Although numerous means were used to recruit participants (e.g., solicitations in newsletters, e-mails, and flyers), only 20 individuals chose to attend one of the six focus group discussions. This resulted in small focus groups (three or four participants), which can be useful when discussing complex subjects (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). Although the small number of respondents is a limitation of the study, some redundancies in responses were apparent by the third focus group discussion. Saturation was reached by the fifth focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Each focus group began with a brief overview of the purpose of the research and the protocol we would follow throughout the discussion. Eight major questions were asked (e.g., How do you define career success? What has prompted that definition for you? How are you preparing yourself to achieve career success?), and each session averaged 1.5 hr in length. One researcher served as moderator while the other took notes. After each question, the note taker summarized the responses before proceeding with the next question. This practice is recommended as a means of analysis verification (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Participants were instructed to clarify or correct any misinterpretations—often participants also added more information during these summaries.

The discussions were tape-recorded, and the researchers prepared complete transcriptions. Patton (2002) recommends researchers do at least some of their own transcription work as a way of getting “immersed in the data” (p. 441). The data analysis method followed the parameters suggested by Krueger and Casey (2000). First, each researcher analyzed the transcripts and field notes independently looking for themes across groups within specific questions. Then, comparisons were made across questions to identify overarching themes. The researchers reiterated this process together and reached agreement on major themes. In addition, the transcripts were read and analyzed by an independent researcher, with expertise in qualitative methods, to control for potential bias in interpretation (Krueger, 1998; Patton, 2002). Her analysis focused on themes within specific questions; a comparison of her notes with our analysis found no major discrepancies.

Demographics

The majority of participants were female ($n = 15$) and the average age of the discussants was 31. Most of the participants would be considered Gen X-ers; seven respondents were in their 20s and only three were in the 24–25 age range (considered Millennials). Fourteen of the discussants had completed either a bachelor's ($n = 8$) or a master's degree ($n = 6$); two had terminal degrees. Fifty percent of the participants were employed in the field of education and the majority indicated they were White ($n = 17$); the other three identified themselves as

African American. In addition to the small number of respondents, the other limitation of the sample is its relative lack of diversity in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, education-level, and industry type.

Career Success Results

The results for this study focus on two types of themes. One type relates directly to questions posed: definitions of career success, influences on career success, developmental opportunities, and perceived barriers to success. The other captures overarching themes that appeared throughout the data: the importance of balancing career with other aspects of life, the individuality of career success, and the dynamic, fluid nature of success as a concept. Each will be discussed in turn.

Question-Related Themes

Perceptions of career success include both how success was defined by the respondents and what prompted those definitions. Although individual ideas of career success and reasoning behind those descriptions varied, common elements were evident early in the process. Similar factors also appeared when participants addressed professional development plans and barriers they had, or expected, to encounter.

Career success. Definitions of career success represented a mix of objective and subjective factors, although the latter were discussed more often, as in these examples. Some contributors focused on meaningful work as being essential to their sense of success; for example, “knowing that and seeing that I am helping people and making a difference in some way.” A related aspect was enjoying work as in, “being happy in your position, in your job.” A number of participants added nonwork factors to define success from a life perspective. This was described both as having adequate time for family and more personal time to devote to community activities, education, or leisure. For example, “My career does not define my life. And actually my overall idea of success is basically having the life I want and doing things that I want. So career is just a means to the end.” Although discussants focused primarily on their personal ideas about success, a few noted that perceptions of others also mattered: “I think sometimes it’s hard not to define my own career success by other people’s standards . . . if someone else doesn’t feel like I’m being successful, it’s hard to get away from that and then I start questioning am I really being successful?”

Respondents cited multiple examples of accomplishment as being important to their definitions of career success. These ranged from typically subjective factors, such as continually challenging oneself and developing skills, through interest in goal achievement (“that sense of accomplishment rejuvenates me and I feel like that’s success”), to more clearly objective issues such as job progression.

Further explanations indicated that evidences of the latter would be recognition, respect among other professionals, and increasing responsibility at work. One participant captured this by noting,

Career success for me then would be like a progression . . . am I responsible for more decisions or different decisions than I have been responsible for in the past? Because I want to be continually evolving and learning and growing and so, that's one of the ways that I measure that.

This illustrates an interesting variation regarding advancement and success: that it is not simply being promoted to a higher position, but taking on something more challenging that could potentially contribute to long-term professional growth.

The most traditional success element identified in this group was salary, a historically based signifier of objective career success. Two points are particularly interesting about this choice among these participants. One is that the emphasis seemed to be on “adequate” compensation, not on becoming wealthy (“as long as I have enough to meet my basic needs and a little bit more, then I feel like I’m doing okay”). The implication was to earn a salary commensurate with one’s education and experience that would permit a comfortable lifestyle. The other point of interest is that this factor was discussed most extensively among a group of single women. Their rationale was that they had no one to depend on but themselves, so they needed to earn enough to cover expenses and to prepare for retirement.

Influences on success. After they had defined their career success goals, participants were asked to reflect on what prompted those perceptions. Although their responses were mixed, the analysis revealed two external and two internal sets of antecedents. The most extensive of the former can best be described as observing others. Contributors cited parents often in this category. On the positive side, they recalled parents who felt passionate about their work, as in this explanation, “to see . . . my mom enjoying what she does, being happy with what she does, helped me to define that career success.” More of the examples were negative however in that participants learned from them what they did not want for themselves. One woman, who grew up in a single parent home, recalled her sense of success came from “what I saw my mom going through and things I want to avoid as well as personal goals for myself that have come from a lot of that past experience.”

Respondents also learned what they did not want from observing others in the workplace who appeared to be unhappy (“watching people slave and complain about their jobs”) or who spent long hours on the job, sacrificing work–life balance. Observations of others also led to a perception that there is a social stigma against people who do not have college degrees.

Additional external influence came from input from others. Several contributors acknowledged their ideas for success were fostered by teachers and bosses they had encountered who encouraged them to strive for more. Some

particularly noted clear expectations from family, especially parents, that they would complete college (“It was non-negotiable, I would go to college.”) and excel in their careers (“my dad also instilled in us that it was important that we are successful”).

Internal influences on career success focused on personal expectations and experiences. Many participants credited their own ambition as their motivator (“I tend to be a person who always tries to achieve a goal”) or their desire to have more control over their careers as fueling their visions of success. Others talked about their commitment to have meaningful work or to achieve a balance between their professional and personal lives (“I’m not willing to sacrifice as much as I would have in the past to achieve my ideal career success.”). Not surprisingly, some of their definitions of success developed from their own work experiences with jobs they liked, jobs they did not like (“there’s no way I’m going to do this the rest of my life”), or from feeling stagnant in an organization.

Developmental opportunities. Discussants in this study had clear ideas about what they are doing now and plan to do in the future to achieve their definitions of career success. Three major strategies were evident in this theme: pursuing further training and education opportunities, networking, and taking the initiative on the job. Several participants discussed taking advantage of training opportunities such as leadership classes offered through the local Junior League and corporate training programs and continuing education classes taken to maintain licenses and credentials. Furthering one’s formal education also was mentioned frequently. Some individuals were pursuing master’s degrees, others planned to do so in the future, and some hoped eventually to enter into a doctoral program.

Another identified strategy was networking. We use this term broadly to describe the various ways respondents discussed how other people play an important role in their career success. On more than one occasion, discussants talked about how “who you know” is critical to career success. Some talked of having mentors and/or role models who influenced their careers. Others stressed the importance of building a significant network of individuals who might be helpful at various times in their careers. Regarding the former, one person said:

I think a lot of it is absorbing. I think because I am young, it’s watching, listening, seeing how other people in my office do things. And noticing what I like and don’t like. There are people who . . . I probably wouldn’t want to emulate. I would hope no one would see me as that person. And there are other people who I watch like a hawk and just absorb what they do and try to use their example.

Another individual, mapping out her strategy to achieve success, stressed building networks:

For me I have two routes: one is develop my relationship network. I think I know the path I want to stay on, I don’t know exactly the stops I want to make. So developing those core relationships I think that will help me learn more about the community and where I want to be and all of that.

The final major strategy that emerged from the data can best be characterized as “taking the initiative.” Several respondents discussed taking risks, trying new things, and “moving outside my comfort zone” as means of achieving success. One person discussed how taking the initiative at work had resulted in positive outcomes. She said,

I anticipate the needs of the division . . . I learn ahead and actually provide some kind of product or idea . . . I've moved from part-time to full-time and have had a couple different promotions through the years. So I have to stay on my toes and always think ahead . . . anticipating needs where they'll be and showing that I'm ready to take care of it right now.

Perceived barriers to success. Focus group discussants also identified barriers they perceived that might influence their ability to achieve their definitions of success. Three factors were identified as impediments to career progress: demographic characteristics, time constraints, and lack of education. Respondents most frequently pointed to a demographic characteristic when asked this question, meaning they felt their gender, marital status, race, or international status was or could be a barrier. However, the most prevalent factor mentioned was age. Several individuals commented on how their youth was an obstacle in terms of gaining notice and being respected. For example, one male indicated, “I think that there are people that I have worked with that don't put any credit in things that I said because they're older than me.” Another individual said, “A lot of older folks think they know everything. They've been around; they've fought. And so when you step up and you try to work with them, as a youth, I'm often overlooked.” Some of the female participants felt being young and female exacerbated the problem. A common response was that “you don't feel like people are taking you seriously.”

Additional comments were made regarding the characteristics listed above. Some female participants discussed gender being a barrier, and an African American male mentioned his race. Two female participants, born and raised in Europe, commented on language issues, visa status, and other negative stereotypes they faced being from outside the United States. A few participants perceived being married and having children as a barrier, whereas some others felt being single was a barrier because financial security then rested solely on one's own shoulders. One female participant struggled with her identity being too wrapped up in her career because she was single:

I wonder sometimes is it . . . really important to find satisfaction in my career because I don't have something so all consuming or something deeply meaningful like a husband, like a child. And I sometimes, wrongly so, look for more satisfaction out of my career than is wise . . . I think a lot of time people run afoul in their work environment because their expectations are too high. I think oftentimes you should not be looking for your sense of community, your emotional needs, your camaraderie, all of these things that we tend to look for in our work environment.

For some, time constraints were perceived as barriers. Usually this was mentioned in relation to pursuing educational and/or training opportunities.

One respondent indicated, "I would love to go back to school but from a time perspective, there is no way I could do that." Others discussed outside activities that take time away from cultivating one's career. For example, one female participant mentioned needing to cut back on her volunteer and social activities so she could devote more time to pursue her education.

The final obstacle mentioned with some consistency was lack of education. Although this small sample was highly educated, some still saw this as a barrier. One person who did not have a college degree mentioned this as a problem for her. Some others indicated the need to pursue a doctorate if they desire to progress in the university system. Another individual, commenting on the increasing need for more formal education, stated,

When we were just our little company, they had engineers that didn't have a degree. After we were purchased, everything became driven toward degree-based hiring. To the point now, where they're hiring entry-level people and it says "degree required, preferred MBA or master's degree." It's like, I'm going to be sweeping the floor with a master's degree!

Overarching Themes

During the data collection and analysis, three other themes became evident. They ran through multiple questions and appeared to underlie many of the participants' overall perspectives of success. One of these pervasive themes was achieving balance in work and life. Some participants identified this as a critical part of their definition of success. Others added it later when reflecting on career strategies, barriers, or ideas about long-term success. Throughout, the discussion surrounding this issue was more broad-based than simply finding time for fitting in both family and work. These participants defined balance from an overall life perspective. This is illustrated in the comments of one respondent reflecting on an earlier discussion about happiness and career:

You said it's important to be happy in your career and I'm thinking, I've started a list of things I want to do before I die. And I've got about twenty things on my list right now and I don't think any of them are related to my career. And so I want to like my job, I want to be good at my job, but everything else matters more to me.

The desire to have success to be more life-based rather than simply career-based was prevalent as single and married participants described their hopes and ideals.

Another transcending theme was the importance of individualizing career success, creating one's own multifaceted definition of what it means to be successful. In this study, participants typically indicated not just one, but a combination of factors that shaped their own personal definitions of success. As a result, those definitions were multidimensional, not focused on a single entity. This became clear early in the process when the first question (defining career success) asked in the first focus group, prompted this response: "I don't think it is an easy thing to define. I think it is very individual. So, obviously, I can only

speak for me.” Another discussant in another session noted, “There are a lot of ways to measure success.” During discussions about defining career success, participants often agreed with one another about key points, but at the same time, they added their own perspectives to each idea, explaining how they personally experienced it, as reinforced by this comment: “I think career success is different for everyone. There may be common threads, but things that I want to achieve, no one else wants to achieve.” Another discussant captured the protean, individual nature of her career when she noted, “My career is not where I work. I am my career and I am portable, and I have a degree and a license and a skill set.” The overall result was that each person offered an individual mosaic of career success, adapting factors identified by the group to their own ideas, creating a unique profile. This profile was evident in their developmental plans, their responses to perceived barriers, and their perspective on what it would mean to reach career success.

The latter led to the third overarching theme of the open-ended nature of career success. Respondents repeatedly noted the fluid nature of career success, reinforcing the importance of remaining open to revising one’s sense of success over time and refuting the idea that success is tied to a particular goal or finite time frame. One stated, “How I’m going to measure success today versus how I’m going to measure success in 10 years is going to be totally different.” Another reflected,

You can get to a point where you feel successful, then something even better comes along. So does that mean that because you take this better opportunity that you weren’t successful beforehand, or is it just a different form of being successful?

So, although respondents were clear about setting their own standards of career success, they also acknowledged they did not expect to reach an endpoint they call “career success” where they stop looking ahead (“I don’t have an endgame.”). Rather, they describe a journey of small successful career events that lead to other challenges and possibilities, an ever-evolving objective that will be revised over time to match interests, opportunities, and circumstances. “I see it more as maintaining because I feel successful now and I want to keep being successful. There isn’t some end-all, be-all state of success, but to have that sense of accomplishment along the way.” Although this does not necessarily mean these young adults will eschew promotions and traditional means of advancement, it does point to a broader and more eclectic view of career success and how it may be achieved.

Discussion

The results of this qualitative study provide additional insight into career perceptions and priorities for young professionals, while reinforcing some ideas from a previous study. For example, these respondents included both objective

and subjective goals in their definitions of success, supporting one of the conclusions drawn by Sturges (1999). Although participants in this study expressed interest in obtaining sufficient income and appropriate advancement, they repeatedly indicated those factors alone would not be enough to fulfill their ideals of success. Not surprisingly then, they also observed that career success is more complex than reaching the highest rung on a particular ladder of advancement. It is perhaps fortuitous in an era when hierarchical promotions are scarce, that this group of employees appears less inclined to see moving up as the singular measure of success. This may in part be the result of the external and internal influences cited by the participants that developed a strong sense of self-worth and efficacy and reinforced the importance of meaningful, enjoyable work that complements life goals. Perhaps it is simply being practical and cognizant of the need to adapt to a changing world, as revealed in their strategies for achieving success and the barriers they identified in that process. In any event, their success ideals seem more wide-ranging, individualized, and self-motivated than those of previous generations.

Implications and Research

Practice Implications

The results of this study suggest several possibilities for effective HRD-based career development for young professionals. Participants' perceptions of success, their preferred strategies to work toward that success, and their perceptions of barriers to reaching their goals provide insights for HRD professionals and researchers. For example, the traditional career development focus has been on advancement within the organization. Employees, like the young adults in this study, who define career success through subjective as well as objective goals will prompt HRD to adapt a more broad-based view of goal attainment—one that acknowledges internal measures of success and the likelihood that employees will not be with the organization throughout their careers. Similarly, they value informal learning, networking, and life and work balance, priorities that will require a more eclectic approach by HRD.

Respondents repeatedly cited informal learning endeavors such as taking the initiative on new projects and seeking out challenging responsibilities among their strategies to achieve career success. This behavior benefits both the organization and the individual, as the former gains from the effort and innovation, and the latter builds transferable skills. The role of HRD is to help legitimize the value of developmental assignments to supervisors and managers and to engage their support in selecting young professionals for these opportunities. The discussants noted that often their efforts to take the initiative were thwarted by those who saw their youth as a limitation rather than an asset. The responsibility of HRD for career development includes an implicit advocacy role for employees, including women and other underrepresented groups faced with

misperceptions about their career potential (Bierema, 1998). Young professionals need HRD as an advocate now. There is economic risk in not addressing this need. Organizations that dismiss the value of 20- and 30-year-olds put themselves in jeopardy of both direct and indirect monetary losses. They may lose their most innovative ideas, lose the productivity of members of their workforce for a decade or more (until they reach the age deemed mature enough to contribute significantly), or lose young employees to competitors (as they weary of waiting for opportunities). For example, respondents here indicated their clear interest in affiliating with organizations where they could use their skills and contribute.

Networks were mentioned frequently by participants in this study as a valuable strategy for enhancing professional growth and building expertise. The meaning was clear however that viable networks are not limited to a particular organization, profession, industry, or geographic area. Respondents described their networking activities as including both professional contacts and community involvement. The key is breadth. These boundary-spanning networks provide the opportunity to learn from varied viewpoints and to build a wide range of contacts. Well-constructed networks also can provide socioemotional support for employees coping with work–life balance concerns (Martins, Eddleston, & Veiga, 2002), a frequently mentioned issue among these participants. By fostering the generation of expanded networks and providing guidance about building and maintaining those systems, HRD can assist young employees in making these critical connections to their professional and personal growth. Although networking frequently was cited as important, some discussants also described connecting relationships that, by definition, seem more like role modeling or coaching. They described identifying behaviors they wanted to emulate or eliminate by observing those in leadership positions or benefiting from the encouragement of bosses or educators. Although mentoring was not singled out as particularly important by this group, their avid interest in networks and related contacts suggests they would respond well to peer or group mentoring. HRD practitioners can help younger employees learn how to best cultivate these interactions and to maximize their potential as learning experiences.

Although work–life balance is by now a familiar part of the HRD lexicon, the participants in this study added another dimension for consideration and action. Some of the respondents spoke specifically about careers that accommodate parental responsibilities; others without dependents were clear about making their careers only part of their lives. Although some may decry what they see as a diminishing of the traditional work ethic, HRD practitioners are in a pivotal position to challenge misconceptions about time spent at work equaling commitment, work quality, or output. By promoting policies that foster work–life balance (see Sullivan & Mainiero [this issue]), HRD also reinforces its role in building and retaining a diverse workforce.

Results of this study reinforce that boundary-spanning career development opportunities are critical to meeting the needs of young professionals. Yet

traditional HRD-based programs and activities, although open to review and updating, should not be abandoned. Organizational training was cited by respondents as one strategy to continue their growth and development. Targeting training to meet specific needs and build skills will keep that option viable and valuable. Similarly, several discussants expressed interest in pursuing graduate degrees, so tuition reimbursement programs, a mainstay of traditional HRD, continued to be valued by this generation of employees.

Finally, it is clear from these results that HRD needs to explore new means of evaluating career development. In past generations, when career success was defined only as advancing within the system, evaluation of the process could be obtained through a record of in-house promotions, a full management development pipeline, and an up-to-date succession plan. As studies like this one prompt organizations to expand their career development options to include more boundary-spanning opportunities and to redefine career success to include subjective as well as traditional objective factors, many traditional evaluation methods will be inadequate to capture change and progress. It is the responsibility of HRD to develop and implement evaluation methods that can assess and measure intangible elements like those identified in this study, career satisfaction, work–life balance, and employability at an individual level. This might entail periodic employee ratings of networking and informal learning opportunities, or evaluating effectiveness of work–family initiatives. On a systems-level, potential gains might be determined by tracking organizational innovation and workforce flexibility (e.g., comparing breadth and depth of innovative projects over time or gauging how well the organization adapts to change; McDonald & Hite, 2005). As perceptions of careers and career success continue to evolve with each generation, career development evaluation needs to progress as well to meet the needs of the present and prepare for the needs of the future.

Research Agenda

As previously mentioned, the small sample size and relative lack of participant diversity are limitations of this study. Research comparing, for example, individuals by a variety of professional or industry groups might yield different results. Half of the individuals in this study were employed by educational institutions. The limited avenues for promotions and the emphasis on education attainment to advance in this sector may have skewed our results. A related variation for further research is to examine how definitions and antecedents of career success differ among young individuals with varied demographic characteristics. Some participants in this study noted gender, race, ethnicity, and marital or parental status, in addition to age, as potential barriers to their career success. The focus in this study was on age-related issues, but further exploration of other identity variables and career success would be important for future work (see, e.g., Juntunen et al., 2001 for a study conducted with American Indians). Regarding age, very few so-called

“Millennials” participated in this study. As larger numbers of this group enter the workforce, more research will be needed analyzing their career perspectives.

The results of this study suggest that individuals perceive career success as a fluid concept, that is, their perceptions of success are likely to change as they continue their career journeys. This finding indicates a need for longitudinal studies that investigate cohort groups at different points during their careers to see if their definitions change. Although this is not the first call for long-term research on career success (see, e.g., Sturges, 1999), the next generation perspective captured in this study adds credence to the need for such follow-through. These young adults represent the first generation to come of age in an era of downsizings that profoundly changed the psychological contract of employment. As a result, they will be the first group to know from the start of their working lives that they will change employers multiple times and that they, not an organization, are in charge of their career paths. If career development is to remain a viable part of HRD in the future, it will be imperative to know how this generation’s perceptions of success stand the test of time.

Equally important is the need for additional qualitative work in this area. This study found that individuals’ definitions of success were individualistic, multidimensional, and dynamic. This suggests a need to better understand the various, complex ways individuals frame this concept; ideas that are difficult to capture adequately using quantitative methods. Additional qualitative work also may result in improved measures to use in subsequent quantitative research.

Clearly individuals’ perceptions of career success are diverse, multifaceted, and fluid. Ironically, as we look to the future of career development and explore contemporary meanings of career success, Gattiker and Larwood’s (1988) observation of nearly twenty years ago still holds true: “Career success is a construct which exists only in people’s minds and which has no clear boundaries” (p. 570). The exploratory nature of this research, although providing no definitive answers, prompts new questions and poses critical challenges that reinforce the need for investigation and action on the part of HRD.

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