SUBJECTIVE CAREER SUCCESS:  
A STUDY OF MANAGERS AND SUPPORT PERSONNEL

Urs E. Gattiker  
School of Management  
The University of Lethbridge

Laurie Larwood  
Department of Management  
University of Illinois-Chicago

ABSTRACT: Despite popular belief that managers are successful by virtue of their positions, few studies have examined the position-success relationship. In this research, it was predicted that subjective career success is a multi-dimensional construct whose facets can be measured by several factors. Moreover, the phenomenon of career success was tested to see if it would relate to an employee’s perception of occupational self-concept and job features. The notion that these dimensions would predict some aspects of career success more accurately for either managers or support personnel was also investigated. The confirming results obtained in this study and their implications for future research as well as practitioners are discussed.

Studies about careers and success have generally focused on the external perspective. Progress, for example, is usually examined using objective measures, such as income and job title (e.g., Kotter, 1982). Yet a person’s own assessment of his/her success may be strongly influenced by subjective internal career concepts (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977, p. 34). Some researchers have argued that it is imperative to study those concepts and employees’ subjective assessment of career success in order to better understand not only individual perceptions but their impact on career development (Driver, 1979; Schein, 1980).

This study was intended both to identify the factors of subjective career success and to determine if the patterns of response differ between
managers and support personnel. The relationships between occupational self-concept, job features and the construct of career success were also examined, as suggested by some researchers (e.g., Driver, 1979; Kohn & Schooler, 1978). Throughout this study, the term "job features" include the employee's perception of job characteristics as well as of the ergonomic work environment. "Occupational self-concept" is the person's self-esteem and self-evaluated job qualifications. These terms will be discussed in detail in a later section.

Career Success

A career might be defined as "an organized path taken by an individual across time and space" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977, p. 31). Although this definition does not imply success or failure, the term is usually viewed as reflecting a person's progress or success in an occupation (Hall, 1976, pp. 2-4). Consequently, most research to date has examined career success as perceived consensually by persons evaluating others' careers, generally using objective criteria such as job title, salary and promotions (cf. Kotter, 1982; Larwood & Gattiker, 1986; Stumpf & Rabinowitz, 1981). The sections below examine both the objective and the subjective components of careers.

Objective career success. In the popular press, a variety of career books assume that a high level position in an organization represents career "success." Managers are portrayed as holding "secrets" for developing successful careers. The literature's intention is to suggest the requirements for success by specifying career strategies, education and the "proper" entry position which will guarantee hierarchical progression and a successful career (cf. Blank, 1981; Lynch, 1978; Molloy, 1977). These books imply that top managers enjoy successful careers by virtue of their positions and that others can or should strive for such success by using the same techniques. Thus they ignore people who actively avoid a managerial career for personal reasons but perceive themselves as, nevertheless, being successful in their careers (Gealy, 1982; Korman, 1980).

In the research literature, career success has usually been defined as a person's hierarchical progression in an occupation (e.g., Bass, 1981; Kotter, 1982). The term describes the objective sequence of steps needed to reach a managerial position. Most of the research has used a single item to measure a person's career success, or two measures have been combined into one single item. For example, Elliott (1982) defined success as a combination of hierarchical level and salary. Pfeffer (1977) used salary level and job title as measures of success when determining whether having an MBA would assist career success. Similarly, Gould and Penley (1984) used salary progression as one indicator in assessing a