

Engagement and Hope as Factors behind Success at Work

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Received: March 25, 2015 Accepted: April 17, 2015 Published: May 1, 2015

doi:10.5296/jse.v5i2.7434 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/jse.v5i2.7434>

Abstract

In this article, the phenomenon of success at work is tightly connected with self-fulfillment and well-being and discussed from an educational psychological perspective. Based on the authors' studies among awarded, successful workers, the analysis of success at work is continued by discussing its relationship with the concepts of engagement and hope. Two purposes are set for the article: to analyze how top workers manifest engagement and hope in their careers and what the core elements of success at work from this perspective are. Success at work is a multidimensional combination of engagement and hope at the level of action requiring courage to seize challenges and dare to indulge in one's work, working hard and persistently, having an optimistic view of oneself as a worker, and adopting an attitude that makes daily work seem meaningful. Hope and engagement appear suitable concepts to explain employees' abilities to survive and succeed in the riptide of modern work life.

Keywords: Success at work, Hope, Engagement, Optimism, Positive psychology, Top worker

1. Introduction

1.1 What is Success at Work?

What is success? Who can define it, eventually? Nicki Baum's comparison between success and North Pole does seem familiar to many of us who think about the nature of success: success at work can be thought as an outcome of self-centered behavior, a state in life filled with envy, cold-heartedness, and opportunism. Our viewpoint is based on positive psychology and interest in human strengths and flourishing. We define success at work tightly connected with self-fulfillment and well-being. In this article, we continue our analysis on success by discussing it the light of the concepts of engagement and hope.

Uusiautti (2013) defined success at work as the combination of three elements based on her research among awarded Finnish top workers, who were considered the examples of people having success at work (see Uusiautti, 2008; see also Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015b). According to the definition, success at work depends on certain individual features. These include, among others, competence (e.g., Paulsson et al., 2005; Schunk & Pajares, 2005), motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Mitchell, 1997), and ability to select positive strategies (Baltes & Freund, 2006; Maddux, 2002). However, the individual worker always is surrounded by the work context. These context-bound features, such as opportunities and restrictions, expectations, and obligations, determine how the person's personal features match with the current conditions (see also Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Individual features and context-bound factors form the fundamental conditions for success. Secondly, success requires positively-focused proactivity at work: success does not happen without action (see also Achor, 2010). This kind of action consists of seizing opportunities, employing one's strengths, and pursuing personal development (Linley, Willars, & Biswas-Diener, 2010). What is important in doing is the positive feeling about work and positive emotions that work produces (Uusiautti, 2008). Finally, success is manifested as a sense of meaningful doing, productivity, and perceived well-being at work (see also Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015a). Studies among Finnish top workers (see e.g., Uusiautti, 2008; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015b) confirmed that the positive experience of work is one of the most essential dimensions of success (see also Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000).

Every human being's life abounds with promises and opportunities, and strengths and positive resources are not attributable only to certain people. The discovery of human strengths, a balanced life, satisfaction and support can lead a person to a path that is not only filled with feelings of happiness and a meaningful life but also shows the way to success. Success at work in this perspective is manifested as positive emotions and attitudes, which means a good feeling about oneself, one's capability, and one's place in the world. Therefore, success is not defined as the achievement of a certain goal or position (e.g., becoming a CEO) but considered a combination of feelings of expertise, accomplishments, and top performances, and the use of positive strategies within a particular context leading to a sense of purpose and meaning.

1.2 The Purpose of This Article

In this article, we analyze positive action at work attempting to describe positive, optimistic strategies as a dimension of success at work. This theoretical analysis is based on our wide

studies in the field. The especial focus is to analyze the concepts of engagement (Hakanen et al., 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2002) and hope (Snyder, 2002; Niles, Amundson, & Neault, 2011) as positive strategies and, thus, as elements of success at work. We will answer the following questions:

- (1) How important hope and engagement are for success at work according to top workers' perceptions?
- (2) How do top workers manifest engagement and hope in their careers?

2. How to Research Success at Work?

Although this article presents a meta-analysis of the previous studies we have conducted about success at work, we will shortly introduce the original research participants. The main research included participants who represented top workers from different occupations (see Uusiautti, 2008). The criteria for the award of "Employee of the Year" were gathered for the twenty occupations from which the participants were chosen (examples of these professions includes fields such as psychology, policing, teaching, etc).

We will now briefly introduce how the participants were described with reference to the criteria for "Employees of the Year". In different occupations, the award emphasized different qualities that could be categorized into three groups. Firstly, having a high professional standard was named as one of the most important qualities among the participants. Regarding this quality, expertise was recognized as referring not only to excellent work quality but also to the ability to actively develop one's work and skills. The following occupations best represented this theme: priest, police officer, nurse, and psychologist. The second group consisted of employees' actions that led to making their work and occupation recognized. Examples of these actions included paying attention to the contents of the occupation (e.g., work tasks), publicly discussing current topics regarding their occupational field, and facilitating the recognition of Finnish proficiency abroad. For example, the criteria for the "Artisan of the Year", "Journalist of the Year", and "Athlete of the Year" awards typified this theme. The difference between these two themes was that the first emphasized winners who had developed their field through their own professional development while the second emphasized winners who used their proficiency to gain publicity. Some of the rewarded employees were selected not by their colleagues but through competitions. These competitions differ remarkably, depending on the occupation (e.g., "Chef of the Year" and "Cleaner of the Year"). However, one feature was common among them, namely, professional skills in several sectors evaluated (e.g., customer service skills and working methods) as depicting core occupational expertise. In other words, only a true professional can win this kind of competition.

The research used a mixed-methods approach (see, e.g., Creswell, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003) and consisted of two phases. In the first phase, success at work was analyzed by focusing on motivation as well as on work engagement. The participants were asked to describe, for example, their experiences about their work, the significance of their work, their job satisfaction, work-related challenges, the most important characteristics of

their work, and themselves as workers. 16 participated (5 men, 11 women) by answering the questionnaires, and seven of them were interviewed. Participants were between 29 and 71 years old (mean = 49).

The second phase of the research concentrated on the process of becoming a top worker. The participants were asked to discuss the following themes: factors that enhance success, difficulties and obstacles they had confronted, and choices and decisions they had made during the course of their lives. In this phase, the employees of the year ($n = 8$; 6 men, 2 women) were nurse of the year, farmer of the year, police officer of the year ($n = 2$), psychologist of the year, priest of the year ($n = 2$), and artisan of the year. Participants were between 36 and 64 years old (mean = 49).

3. Hope Boosts Success at Work

Success at work has something to do with the essential elements of well-being as, for example, defined by Prof. Martin Seligman (2011). Seligman defines well-being as a construct of certain elements that each contribute to the overall well-being. In his five-dimensional model of well-being, Seligman names positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement as the core elements. Here, engagement means doing something with total concentration, at the limits of one's skills. From this perspective, engagement is connected with the concept of flow (see Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). On the other hand, engagement theories that define the reasons for doing something persistently are closely connected with theories about intrinsic motivation (see e.g., Latham & Pinder, 2005). According to Schneider (2001), engagement can be seen, in addition to persistence, as flexibility and creative thinking at work, as well as higher subjective well-being. Regardless of achieving the sense of optimal doing when working alone or as a member of a team, the opportunity use one's strengths and skills played the leading role in engagement among top workers:

"Sometimes I can come to work during weekend if I am really enthusiastic about a developmental project, whether it was an initial idea or not. Time goes by and it can be that I come here in my office on Saturdays and Sundays to do it. I do not just sit and watch the clock hoping that the workday was over." (An Awarded Finnish Psychologist of the Year)

Similarly, the concept of achievement as an element of well-being is also interesting from the perspective of success at work: "people pursue success, accomplishment, winning, achievement, and mastery for their own sakes" (Seligman, 2011, p. 18). The suggestion is that people tend to pursue success naturally, which is especially manifested when acting free of coercion. The connection with well-being is with what people do, or merely, choose to do.

"There is always something to improve. I challenge myself daily. It keeps this aging designer away from Bingo halls." (An Awarded Finnish Industrial Designer of the Year)

However, we argue that engaged action and achievements necessitate a certain kind of attitude as well, that resembles positivity, trust in one's abilities, and hopeful views about the world and one's place in it (see also Uusiautti, 2015a). Indeed, for example optimism is one of the core concepts of positive psychology (Peterson, 2000) and affect how people pursue

goals. If they believe their goals are achievable, they are optimistic (Carver & Scheier, 2002). This is why the concept of optimism is often confused with hope. Gillham and Reivich (2004) explain that the difference between these two concepts is that hope is often defined as a wish for something with some expectation that it will happen, while optimism is typically defined as a tendency or disposition to expect the best. Thus, hope typically refers to expectations in a specific situation, while optimism refers to general expectations. Peterson and Luthans (2003) consider optimism a vital part of hope, but emphasize that they still are distinctively separate concepts.

Optimism therefore determines how we experience events. Shawn Achor (2010) noted that “By scanning our mental map for positive opportunities, and by rejecting the belief that every down in life leads us only further downward, we give ourselves the greatest power possible” (p. 109). This means that people have a habitual way of explaining events (Peterson, 2000; Peterson, Seligman, & Vaillant, 1988). Furthermore, optimism is shown to be connected to higher life satisfaction, health, perseverance, and resilience, whereas pessimism has connection to depression (Reivich & Gillham, 2003; Reivich et al., 2013).

Hope is often defined as a wish for something with some expectation that it will happen; it is an important human strength (Seligman et al., 2005). It is worth noticing that realistic, positive expectations closely relate to an expectation that one’s behavior will be effective. When considering the phenomenon of success at work, hope is particularly important especially in the light of achieving future goals and plans and how certain events at work—especially the negative ones—are experienced. Positive expectations can partly result from a hopeful attitude as described by one top worker:

“Perhaps hopefulness [describes me the best]. It is a little like optimism and that you can trust that you will deal with it. - - That you believe that you will survive, even if you do have difficulties and have to try again or another route. And always say that well, here we go again.” (An Awarded Finnish Police Officer of the Year)

It has also been argued that the best results in life can be achieved with realistic optimism (see Schneider, 2001). Realistic optimism involves enhancing and focusing on the favorable aspects of our experiences. Consequently, Schneider (2001) includes the awareness of reality in optimism by stating that “realistic optimism involves hoping, aspiring, and searching for positive experiences while acknowledging what we do not know and accepting what we cannot know” (p. 253). It is worth noticing that realistic, positive expectations closely relate to self-awareness and self-knowledge. When considering the phenomenon of success at work, realistic optimism may be particularly important as it can considerably predict the likelihood of achieving future goals and plans.

One of the recent career theories is Spencer G. Niles et al.’s (see Niles, 2011; Niles, Amundson & Neault 2011) career flow theory which can help analyzing the question from an employee’s perspective. Their Hope-Centered Model of Career Development (HCMCD) is based on six core concepts that are hope, self-reflection, self-clarity, visioning, goal-setting and planning, and implementing and adapting. Niles (2011) explains the concepts as follows:

“hope is needed to believe that one can manage any career flow experience effectively; self-reflection is necessary to understand and label a particular career flow experience accurately; self-clarity is required to understand the personal and environmental resources necessary for coping effectively with the challenges encountered; visioning, goal setting, and planning are required tasks for imagining a successful outcome and identifying strategies for achieving it; and implementing and adapting are necessary for effectively navigating each particular career flow experience.” (p. 175)

Also Snyder (2002) defines the skills of self-motivation and reaching goals with the concept of hope. Snyder defines hope as a positive motivational state that is based on the interaction between goals, planned actions, and agency (see also Snyder, Irving, & Anderson, 1991). Eventually, the most extraordinary characteristic among top workers is their positive attitude, the hope they expressed in their work. Successful workers do not give up in the face of conflicts. Instead, they see such situations as opportunities to reassess their occupational skills and, if necessary, to study and develop. Interestingly, this tendency manifests also engagement: they are persistent and they have willpower. Furthermore, top workers see conflict situations as challenges that they expect they can solve—instead of hopeless dead ends.

“So, first you try again, if it’s worth it. But sometimes you have to look in the mirror, admit that this won’t lead anywhere, and find another route. I have done it many times during my career.” (An Awarded Finnish Police Officer of the Year)

This kind of proactive attitude, willingness to strive for success, is at the very core of top workers’ characteristics and means that they have waypower, the other important element of hope in addition to willpower (Snyder, 2002). If one expects the best, one has the will. But, if one is ready to work for it, one has the way, too. In this sense, success at work can be achieved by anyone and in any profession—whether it was understood as climbing up the career ladders from a rank-and-file police officer into a chief of police or the widening expertise in a nurse’s profession:

“And then, I have been developing quality work and pursued an auditing qualification, and then I was able to evaluate other unites with my co-worker.” (An Awarded Finnish Nurse of the Year)

4. Success as Positive, Engaged Strategies

The analysis shows that although top performances or steady, quality performance can lead to success, it can also be seen as a more comprehensive process (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015). Namely, people who want to develop and seize opportunities in life can be seen as following a positive strategy. Carver and Scheier (2005) have pointed out that it is also important that people realize when goals can be met and when it is time to give up. Ultimately, it is about the ability to estimate the situation and act accordingly. Likewise, future expectations greatly affect how people react to changes and challenges. An optimistic attitude plays a salient role (Carver & Scheier, 2002), however, the strategy of success can also be described in other ways.

For example, Locke (2002) claims that success requires persistent trials. One has to think about what is a desirable goal and why, what kinds of intermediate goals should be set, how to reach the goal, how to prioritize demands that are contradictory in relation to the goal, and how to overcome future obstacles and setbacks. Baltes and Freund (2006; see also Freund & Baltes, 1998) add that people's lives are filled with opportunities and limitations that can be mastered adaptively through selection, optimization, and compensation (Freund & Baltes, 1998). At the core of selecting suitable goals, optimizing one's action, and compensating if necessary lies one's self-knowledge; the recognition of one's strengths and abilities. Indeed, for example, Covey (2006) considers success as a strategy in which knowledge, skills, and will are combined. Knowledge means that one knows what to do and why, but it is skills can make it happen. Will here means motivation or the need to achieve something. As these three dimensions meet, a strategy leading to success can emerge.

Naturally, the constant pursuit of success can lead to an endless treadmill—compared for instance with the pursuit of happiness (see Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Diener, Lucas, & Napa Scollon, 2006). As also Seligman's (2011) idea of achievement as a part of well-being pointed out, people constantly strive for something. Success at work is also a process that has this escaping nature, but it is much more than that too. Happiness can be seen as a state that fade, but when success at work is understood as a way to fulfil one's skills, develop, and learn, it contributes to a human being's well-being. It can become a positive spiral draws from but also nourishes hope and engagement.

5. Discussion: How to Combine Engagement and Hope to Reach Success at Work?

According to Snyder's (2002) hope theory, hope does not exist without a clear and compelling mental picture of a desirable goal and planning of various ways to reach the goal. From the perspective of success at work, hope seems a way to face positive and negative situations and events at work. Hope also includes a certain type of positive self-image as oneself as a worker which helps perceiving adversities and difficulties as challenges and opportunities to develop.

Hopeful attitude is not, however, enough alone. Engagement to work is also an important element of success. It is manifested in many levels of action. First of all, success requires persistence and readiness to work hard (Maslach & Leiter, 1999). But in order to find toil pleasing, another type of engagement is also needed; the one resulting from being able to become one with the target (as described by Seligman, 2011). This means that it is equally important to find one's work suitable to oneself, an arena of using one's strengths and abilities widely (see also Uusiautti, 2015b).

To sum up, success at work is quite a multidimensional combination of engagement and hope at the level of action. First, it requires that one seizes challenges and dares to indulge in one's work. Everyone's work includes challenges of some sort, but the crucial factor is that they should be considered as opportunities to develop oneself and one's work. Eventually, it is possible to see the potential in oneself. Second, success at work needs, well, work. There is not any shortcuts to success, nor can top workers avoid mistakes, difficulties, or boring tasks at work. With an optimistic attitude, it is possible to find pleasure from accomplishing the

most tedious parts of work. Third, one has to have an optimistic attitude about oneself as well. Whatever happens at work, successful workers trust in their expertise and abilities to cope with the situation. James E Maddux (2002) has wisely said that “This truth is that believing you can accomplish what you want to accomplish is one of the most important ingredients – perhaps the most important gradient – in the recipe for success” (p. 277). Maddux refers to self-efficacy, a sense of knowing one’s skills and capability (see also Shepperd, Ouellette, & Fernandez, 1996).

Last but not least, the attitude that is taken in work makes daily work meaningful (see also Mäkikangas, 2007). Having realized the importance of one’s work and one’s ability to do it well, the meaning has been discovered (Uusiautti, 2015a).

6. Conclusion

Work motivation has been a popular research target but still it should be studied in the light of the challenges each era has (Ambrose & Kulik, 1999; Cheung et al., 2013). Engagement and hope apparently are important factors behind success at work. More often than not they are learned through work experience, self-evaluation, and feedback from others. To adopt successful work attitudes in the work community, the role of supervisors and colleagues is great. But also one’s background factors, such as support provided by the childhood home (see e.g., Hyvärinen & Uusiautti, 2015; Oberle et al., 2014; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013), are worth studying. Indeed, education aims at enhancing students’ well-being and success in life, in other words, helping children to find their place in society. When considering success at work, it is crucial to discuss how education could support optimistic attitudes toward one’s performing. Good practices and models should be introduced not only at school but also in workplaces, so that everyone could find their own strength areas and employ them fully.

We have outlined here the role of hope as a part of success at work. Optimistic attitudes are at the core of hope, but yet, optimism can be viewed critically. It seems that realistic optimism is necessary for success. Actually, also Sweeney, Carroll, and Shepperd (2006) have noted that both optimism and shift from optimism are important to optimal development, because they include a readiness to deal with setbacks and a readiness to take advantage of opportunities. Through self-knowledge and awareness one’s strength it is possible to employ optimistic attitudes the best, which also influence one’s engagement. Fundamentally, the relationship between success, engagement, and hope is quite reciprocal in nature (see also Xanthopoulou et al., 2009).

The idea of hope at work complements earlier theories, such as Bandura’s (1997) theory of self-efficacy or Mitchell’s (1997) theory of work motivation, that have, for their part, helped explain the phenomenon of success at work. The hope perspective provides a new understanding about success. Furthermore, the concept of hope is interesting here because it can explain employees’ abilities to survive in the riptide of modern work life. Indeed, more attention should be directed at the role of hope and engagement in how workers face changes at work or in management of change in work (see also Uusiautti, 2015c).

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