Perceptions of careers and the role of career development have changed in recent history in the wake of downsizings and organizational restructurings. Both employers and employees seem to have traded loyalty for expediency. At the same time, the global marketplace has increased competition for products and services, prompting renewed interest in recruiting and retaining innovative staff. The focus will be on attracting the newest generation of employees entering the workforce all over the world. This study uses this dynamic context to address young adults’ perceptions of career success and to explore how HRD can respond appropriately in career development practice and research. This qualitative study employed focus groups to gather data from 31 young adults (average age 29) currently residing in the Midwestern United States. While this is not a global sample, this research lays the groundwork for more broad-based study. The results show these young adults use both objective and subjective goals to define career success, and they express clear interest in balancing life and work as a critical aspect of that success. Implications for HRD include how to update career development to accommodate the needs of this present and future workforce and ideas for further research.

Keywords: career success, career development, work-life balance, young adults (Generation X, Millennials)

Career development (CD), once a mainstay of HRD, as evidenced by McLagan’s human resource wheel (McLagan, 1989), has diminished in recent years as perceptions of careers have changed (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Increasingly, organizations seeking financial stability restructure and downsize, abandoning long term commitments of employment. In turn, many employees, who once would have connected their career goals to a particular system, are focusing on building individual career paths and moving as needed to seek better opportunities. This is especially evident among younger employees coming of working age in this transitional environment. Their approach to careers is important to address because they are a vital population in the global economy (International Labor Office, 2006). At a time when organizations worldwide need to recruit and retain the best employees to compete in a global market, they are missing the opportunity to develop talent and use their present and future resources effectively. As a strategic partner in organizational growth, HRD has a vested interest in reviving career development to enhance organizational learning and knowledge management.

Incorporating career development into the strategic role of HRD will require new approaches and perspectives. Gilley, Egeland, and Gilley (2002) suggested that HRD must approach the interests of both individuals and organizations in a partnership that builds competencies for jobs within the current system while developing knowledge and skills for employees to take into future endeavors. Simonson's definition of career development addressed this reciprocal relationship as well:

Career development is the outcome of the individual's career planning and the organization’s provision of support and opportunities, ideally a collaborative process (as cited in Simonson, 1997, pp. 6-7).

To respond to current interests of both employers and employees, McDonald and Hite (2005) suggested that HRD must move beyond traditional CD activities to embrace “boundary-spanning” options (informal learning opportunities occurring both within and outside of traditional organizational structures). This approach recognizes that while it may be a time-limited relationship, employers and employees can be of mutual benefit to one another while they are connected.
Employees most likely to be affected by this new career development perspective are those currently in their twenties and thirties. Frequently described by some authors, as Generation X (born mid-1960's- early 1980's) and Millennials or Nexters (born early 1980's-late 1990's) (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000), they enter the workforce during a time when job security has given way to employment flexibility (Lewis, Smithson & Kugelberg, 2002). They expect to change workplaces frequently as they pursue their goals, whether by choice or necessity. So, they are less inclined to confine their career plans to a single organization and more likely to move to systems that foster their continued growth and development. Hall (2002) described the shift to individually directed, rather than organization-based, career management as the protean career. Arthur and Rousseau (1996) coined the term "boundaryless" to illustrate career movement across multiple workplaces. These are the career models for many young professionals. As organizations strive to attract and retain the best employees, it is critical that strategic HRD include understanding and accommodating the career interests and needs of these current and future employees. This paper reports an exploratory study examining young employees' perceptions of career success and how they plan to achieve success as they have defined it. Implications for HRD also will be provided.

Literature Review

Young Employees

In the US, much of what we know about young employees is based on popular press publications focusing on generational differences (see, for example, Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; and Zemke, et al., 2000). Loughlin & Barling (2001) noted the importance of differentiating this literature from empirical work that needs to be conducted examining young workers' attitudes and behaviors. While this is not a comprehensive review of the research, it is important to highlight some of the important characteristics of these individuals.

Loughlin and Barling (2001), in their review of the literature on young workers, discussed how family, particularly parents' work experience, has shaped 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 (2001) concluded: "... 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 Generation Xers' 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 that the psychological contract between young workers and their employers may be "multidimensional." A 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).

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

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 usually described as those tangible indicators such as pay, promotions, and job level. Whereas subjective success represents those 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 for example, Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Gunz & Heslin, 2005; Heslin, 2005; Ng,
Eby, Sorensin, & 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.

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). However, few studies have focused specifically on younger employees. One notable exception is Sturges’s (1999) research examining managers’ definitions of career success (Sturges, 1999). She found young managers (in their twenties and thirties) were more likely to be “Climbers,” those viewing success as receiving promotions and pay increase, whereas older managers (in their forties) were more likely to be “Influencers”, those concerned with having an impact on their organizations.

In addition, very few studies have utilized qualitative methods to examine the career success construct. Heslin (2005) has argued for more qualitative research in this area to improve “the conceptualization and measurement of subjective career success” (p. 117). This study will address both of these concerns about the existing literature. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed in this study: 1. How do young workers define career success? 2. What strategies are young employees using to achieve career success as they have defined it?

Method

Our desire to capture this group of employees’ definitions of career success in their own words resulted in a qualitative approach. Focus group methodology was used because of its capacity to gather a range of ideas and to “uncover factors that influence opinions, behaviors, or motivation” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 24).

Research participants were recruited from an organization working to develop young leaders in a specific region in the Midwest and from the student population at the university where the researchers are employed. A total of 31 individuals participated in the study. Eight focus group discussions were conducted, the majority of them consisted of four participants.

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 and each session was one to two hours 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 (Krueger, 1998). 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, p. 441) recommends researchers do at least some of their own transcription work as a way of getting “immersed in the data.” Each researcher analyzed the transcripts and field notes independently looking for themes across groups within specific questions. Then, comparisons were made across questions (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The researchers reiterated this same process together and reached agreement on major themes. Additionally, the transcripts were read and analyzed by an independent researcher, not associated with the project, to control for potential bias in interpretation (Krueger, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Demographics

Nineteen (19) females and thirteen (13) males comprised the sample. The average age of the discussants was 29. Eighteen of the discussants had completed either a bachelor’s (12) or a master’s degree (6); two had terminal degrees. All respondents had some college experience and seven of them were juniors or seniors at the university. Only four participants were not employed outside the home; these individuals were full-time students. The majority of the subjects reported their race/ethnicity as Caucasian (26).

Results

Analysis of the results will focus on three themes that add particular insight to career success among young adults: subjective and objective goals, life and work balance, and goal
accomplishment. All have relevance for enhancing career development and each will be
discussed in turn.

**Objective and Subjective Goals**

Both objective (e.g. salary, promotion) and subjective (e.g. personal satisfaction)
indicators of career success were noted by these participants. Frequently, individuals identified
both as important career goals.

The traditional objective goal, salary, was addressed, but with a somewhat different
perspective than might be expected. References to compensation were couched in the context of
earning a sufficient amount to meet one’s needs, focusing on “financial stability” rather than on
amassing wealth. Typical comments included: “earn enough money to be happy,” “enough
money to support a family and be happy of course,” “financially, am I able to pay my bills and
make my lifestyle maintained—- not overly, but just maintaining it,” and “as long as I have enough
to meet my basic needs.” There was an underlying sense of wanting to be fairly compensated for
one’s work and understanding the role financial security plays in achieving life goals. Clearly,
money was part of the equation, but it was not the primary focal point of career success for these
young adults.

Similarly, a few respondents included job progression, another historically-based
objective measure of success, as being important. For example, “I would say also reaching the
top of whatever area you are in or the top of the company would be success for me.” Another
described this as continuing to advance in responsibility, “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?” However it was defined, this goal was discussed in conjunction with
other, clearly subjective factors.

One of the topics addressed in these discussions was not so much a goal, as a means of
determining progress. Essentially, it focused on the importance placed on comparing oneself to
others. This has been described by Heslin (2005) as an other-referent criterion for gauging
subjective career success. Some participants were clearly other-referent. For example, one
prefaced her definition of career success by saying: “I define success in relation to other people.”
Another respondent observed a similar sentiment, “I think that who you compare yourself with is
also what helps you to feel more successful or less successful.” Acceptance of this idea varied.
One person acknowledged using a comparison, but seemed uncomfortable about doing so,
noting “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.” Others
expressed their lack of interest in comparisons, as illustrated with this comment, “I don’t like what
people think and I don’t really care—basically if you’re happy doing your job that would be the
most important thing, not necessarily what other people think.” This statement also identifies two
other subjective goals cited by respondents, a sense of autonomy and enjoying your work.

Not surprisingly, the participants invested in the subjective goal of autonomy, or having
control, were less inclined to value comparisons with others as important to their ideas of career
success. Some did however juxtapose their descriptions of autonomy with a reference to salary.
One participant described it this way:

Autonomy, freedom, not necessarily through a paycheck or through the
things you can buy, but for me personally, I would rather have the ability to
make my own decisions. That’s the best reward I can get, just control, I
guess.

Later, the same person went on to say, “hopefully, regardless the amount of money I earn or title,
I’m going to work myself into a position where I can make my own decisions.” This was reflected
by another respondent who defined career success as “doing what I want to do, regardless of the
money, or regardless of the status. Simply doing what I want to do.” Others viewed “control,” as
exercising authority, such as “the more decision making that is within my control, that I am given,
the more successful I feel,” or “being able to make decisions without going to (the boss).”

Enjoyment or happiness in career choice and work experience was the other subjective
goal referenced frequently, both directly and indirectly. In some instances, it was mentioned early
as preeminent in defining career success, as in “being satisfied with what you’re doing, being
happy,” or “being able to enjoy what you do day-in day-out for the duration of your work life.” For
others, it was one of the composite factors leading to an overall sense of career success. This
was expressed in various ways. Respondents referred to the importance of feeling passionate about their work or loving what they do, or measuring success by responding to the question, “Am I happy?” Individuals used terms like “personal happiness” or having “no regrets” or “a feeling of satisfaction that I enjoy what I am doing.” This was often contrasted with examples of people they had observed who stayed in jobs they lacked passion for or disliked. As one person noted, “If I didn’t like what I was doing, I would have to find something else.”

**Life and Work Balance**

The importance of balancing life and work was another pervasive theme throughout the data. Both male and female respondents were clear that while they want to find employment that satisfies them and fully expect to make significant contributions on the job, work is only one dimension of life, and their plans for success do not give it disproportionate prominence. The following statements capture some of those sentiments:

- “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.

- “Life is not just work. For me, I like to have fun. I know you have to work, you have to be serious sometimes, but at the same time, you have to enjoy what other facets of life there are.

- “...balancing your life and career is very important to me, and I don’t want to get too wrapped up in my career and too focused on that that you lose track of everything else in your life.

Despite the interest of some participants in advancing in their careers, others used concern for keeping balance as a rationale for not aspiring to higher positions. A sample of their comments reflect this conscious choice: “I don’t want my title to define me,” or “being CEO of a company isn’t very appealing to me. I’d rather have less pay and not nearly as many hours.” A related perspective was preserving time for family life in particular. Respondents mentioned putting family before career and making career choices that may better accommodate family life. Several supported their reasoning with observations of older adults who appeared to have sacrificed family to advance on the job. As one person stated, “once I start my family...I’m not going to want to do that. As I saw how they balanced success, they placed so much on their career and not on their family.”

**Goal Accomplishment**

Three strategies for achieving career success appeared consistently in the data: adaptability, networking, and continued learning. Respondents identified them as separate entities, but implied they would use them in conjunction.

Adaptability was described in various forms. Participants referred to being open to change and staying flexible (“life is fluid”), as well as “moving outside my comfort zone” and other forms of risk taking. Other comments addressed “anticipating needs... and showing that I’m ready to take care of it right now” or “being open to additional opportunities for growth.” The overarching idea was recognizing and embracing probabilities, possibilities, and potential.

Networking (including mentoring and role models) was recognized as a key strategy for building career success. Respondents described developing interpersonal contacts with peers as well as more established professionals, using phrases like, “develop my relationship network,” “meet as many people as I can and make those good impressions and those good connections with people,” and “making as many contacts as possible.” Some specified the reciprocal interactive nature of these relationships, as in “doing favors for people” or making each encounter positive so “they would look to you again for assistance.”

Continued learning, as described by these participants, includes formal academic programs, organization-based training, and informal opportunities for building skills. They described enrolling in graduate studies, taking advantage of in-house training offerings on the job, and learning from the experience of trying new things (e.g. taking on projects or accepting new responsibilities). While acknowledging the critical role of education (“it is important to be always learning”), several also commented on the delayed gratification aspect of school. Many learning
endeavors require time and money in the present to prepare for career goals (“we’ll have a better lifestyle down the road—sacrificing some of our fun now for a better future”). They accept that as part of the process of building a career.

Discussion

This study provided additional information on the career needs and interests of young adults, however there were limitations that may affect the generalizability of the data. As is often the case in qualitative research, the numbers in this study were small. In addition, this group of participants lacked diversity in that most self-identified as Caucasian and lived in the same Midwestern community in the U.S. Finally, this was a highly educated sample, a distinction that may have skewed some of the results, particularly regarding interest in continued learning and education.

In reviewing the data from this study, the participants’ mix of objective and subjective career goals represented a pragmatic, yet individualized perspective to life and work. The role of financial stability in their planning illustrated their practical mindset of having sufficient money to make choices in life. Unlike some of their workforce predecessors who aspired to large paychecks as a sign of status or peer recognition, this group appeared to regard financial compensation primarily as a means to an end. Their interest was less on accumulating wealth than on earning enough to accommodate a comfortable life where work dedication balanced with commitment to family and other pursuits. Their subjective goals of autonomy and enjoyment in the work that they pursued fit the work/life balance objective as well. For these young adults, career success was viewed in tandem with life goals. They planned to “work to live, not live to work.”

This restructuring of traditional work priorities might appear to some as simply a poor work ethic (Burke, 2004), but for this new generation of employees, it simply redefines the role of work in their life plan. As one participant noted, “work shouldn’t consume your whole life.” This perspective requires a commensurate shift in how organizations approach career development. As these data show, young workers remain invested in their careers; they just view the career/life investment equation differently. HRD needs to respond to that difference when designing career development opportunities for young adults.

Implications for HRD Practice

Meeting the challenge of making career development relevant to the newest members of the workforce will require a yes/and, rather than an either/or approach. Meaning, rather than abandoning the traditional CD activities (e.g. tuition reimbursement, training), add to them with more innovative options that span functional and organizational boundaries (McDonald & Hite, 2005). For example, respondents were clear about their interests in continued learning opportunities, through both formal and informal processes. Training and education programs that support higher education help to attract and retain employees, but they are not enough. Informal opportunities to learn on the job by taking on challenging opportunities are critically important to help employees feel a sense of autonomy while progressively building their skills. HRD’s role is to foster initiatives that promote informal learning for young employees, within and outside the organization. This may entail combining growth opportunities on projects or assignments with mentoring programs and networking possibilities, since networking was identified often as a key strategy. For this population that values adaptability and remaining flexible in their plans and approaches to career goals, HRD needs to expand upon the traditionally system-bound development protocols to engage new ideas and venues for career development.

Future Research

Given the lack of participant diversity in this study – particularly in terms of race/ethnicity and educational background, it is important that more qualitative research be done involving individuals with varied demographic characteristics. For example, all of the participants in this study had some college experience; some had, or intended to earn advanced degrees. Examining young adults with less education or adults in blue collar jobs, might yield very different perspectives on career success. Do they also define career success in subjective terms or is that a luxury brought about by educational opportunity?
The participants in this study primarily identified as Caucasian and were from the US. More research is needed with diverse race/ethnic composition. Four individuals in this study were from other countries. Given the nature of the study, there was no way to discern major differences or similarities in responses. However, we believe cultural differences are likely to be apparent in perspectives of career success in other countries.

One of the focus groups in this study was composed of pre-med students. While their definitions of career success were similar to those individuals in other groups, their strategies regarding how to accomplish this were very short-term focused. Discussions of getting into and surviving medical school dominated this portion of the conversation. Studies focusing on specific professional career paths – law, medicine, pharmacy, etc. could assist educational institutions helping prepare these individuals. In addition, these professionals can be considered the original protean career pioneers and from that perspective, studying these groups might help others better understand how one develops a protean career path.

Finally, longitudinal studies are needed to determine if these young adults' definitions of career success will change through the years. Several participants in our study felt their definitions would change as they progressed in their careers. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine if young adults do in general, view their careers differently than previous generations or whether their perceptions more closely reflect their “elders” as they mature.

Conclusion

Learning more about how young adults view career success can benefit HRD, organizations, and a new generation of employees. This study was designed to prompt interest in career development for this population among HRD practitioners and researchers, to provide ideas for follow-up, and to foster additional research on a population of growing importance to the global workforce. These young adults are the present and future, the up-and-coming decision makers. It will be their dreams, plans, skills, and knowledge that will guide organizations around the world. Understanding their goals and helping them develop their strengths will have wide-ranging results.

References


