

Career development practices: A global comparison

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We have entered an international era where the need for dynamic, globally-equipped, adaptive employees has become increasingly necessary to the success of organisations. Whilst employees want to develop their careers, they may lack the career management skills to do so and look to their employer for support. Better clarity is needed to understand the career management skills and practices that people can develop to navigate this new reality. This study compared 2870 individuals across 40 nations to identify the Career Development Practices (CDPs) they used and their relationship to career satisfaction. All seven sets of career practices (stretching oneself, knowing oneself, adapting to change, spotting opportunities, networking, building one's brand, and reflection/planning) were predictive of career satisfaction with networking emerging as the most important. In addition, results indicated that organisational career support added to and compensated for lower individual scores on the career practices. Furthermore, the CDPs that predicted career satisfaction varied by global region indicating that the importance of the practices varies by culture. Practical applications for career practitioners and talent management professionals are discussed in addition to suggestions for future research.

Introduction

The workplace has become more dynamic, volatile, complex and global. The world of work is changing. Some have described it as the era of continuous discontinuity where change is the only constant. To not only survive, but thrive in this new reality, organisations need to be adaptive. So do the employees within them.

Career adaptability

Some organisations have addressed the volatility and increasing demands by attempting to find, select, and develop their 'high potential' employees. The trouble with only focusing on a few employees is that in today's organisations, the success or failure of an organisation doesn't necessarily rest only on senior leaders. The customer service and decisions made by frontline employees can make or break the company. Employees are needed at all levels that can sense, adapt and respond to dynamic changes in their environment (Hall, 2004). Organisations are also recognising the need to identify diverse talent from throughout their workforce and see the benefits of developing the 'vital' many.

Furthermore, focusing on fixed traits that people do or do not have is limiting. A more powerful approach is to find and nurture employee capabilities that can be learned and developed, and to allow employees to excel in their area of 'strength'. Whilst employees need to develop the skills and knowledge to do their job effectively, there are other practices that employees can use to meet future workplace demands. This includes developing the skills and attitudes to proactively manage their current and future career. These meta-skills have been called Career Development Practices because they are higher level skills that can be learned and developed. As careers have become increasingly protean (constantly changing and self-driven) (Hall, 2004) and boundaryless (across life roles and across organisations) (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001), employees need to have strong, adaptive skillsets to address current demands and position themselves to take on future challenges.

To help address this need, a global sample of workers was used to explore three questions: (1) Which career development practices are used most/least often and

what is their relationship with the employees' career satisfaction? (2) To what extent does organisational support enhance or compensate for individual's career development practices? And (3) Which career development practices are most often used in different global regions and which ones are most predictive of employee career satisfaction?

Career development practices (CDPs)

The research in career development suggests that seven meta-skillsets are particularly important in helping employees meet the demands of a changing workforce (Lombardo and Eichinger, 1989; Winter and Jackson, 2004; Yost and Plunckett, 2009). These include: (1) *Knowing oneself* – accurately understanding one's capabilities and one's strengths and weaknesses in relation to others; (2) *Stretching oneself* – the willingness and ability to take on challenging tasks and assignments that will lead to growth; (3) *Adapting to change* – the willingness and ability to adjust one's approach and adjust to new demands in the work environment; (4) *Spot the opportunities* – one's ability to identify and create work opportunities for oneself; (5) *Building a network* – establishing connections with others for social and professional support; (6) *Building one's brand* – crafting an active and visible reputation in/outside your organisation; and (7) *Reflection/planning* – regularly stopping to assess what is working, what isn't working and planning the future.

These seven meta-skills are important in an economy where employees are increasingly called on to think of themselves as a 'business of one' and challenged to manage their own career. The good news is that all of these skills can be learned. They are practices that can be developed through deliberate practice. Employees and career coaches can enhance these skills. Organisations also play an important role in creating the conditions and process where employees have the opportunity to develop and enhance their skillsets.

Organisational support

More specifically, organisations facilitate the environment and conditions where employees can practice and develop these meta-career skills. Research suggests that organisational processes such as performance management, training, and mentoring

programmes can enhance (or get in the way of) employee development (Tansky and Cohen, 2001). Similarly, co-workers and employees' immediate managers play important roles in their development.

For the sake of what?

Enhancing employee adaptability and accelerating their development begs another important question – development for the sake of what? Highly adaptive employees in dynamic, complex environments tend to be better performers, are more engaged, and more satisfied with their jobs. The latter two dimensions are particularly important in today's economy. The employee contract has changed in the recent decades from lifetime employment to a continuously negotiated contract between the organisation and the employee (Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod, 2001). The two parties will continue to do business as long as the relationship remains valuable for both the employee and the employer. It can and will be terminated whenever the conditions are no longer met.

Organisations that are dependent on their talent are in a tenuous position. To keep a strong, effective workforce, they need to provide an attractive, compelling work environment where employees feel like they are contributing, satisfied with their job, and continuing to grow. If they don't perceive that these conditions are being met, jobs are becoming mobile in the increasingly dynamic and boundaryless marketplace. An employee's satisfaction with their pay, benefits, sense of doing work one enjoys, meaning, growth, and work/life balance - all become critical in their decision to stay in a job or move (Michaels et al, 2001). Thus, for organisations, attracting, selecting and retaining a talented workforce has hinged on their ability to build the employability of their workforce - through methods such as career development – which in turn will increase performance abilities and career satisfaction.

The global workforce

Although organisations are increasingly called to operate in a global environment, a better understanding is needed to sort out which Career Development Practices are most important in different global regions. For example, one could imagine

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that some dimensions such as knowing oneself and building one's brand would be particularly important in individualistic cultures such as the United States and the United Kingdom, whereas other dimensions such as networking would be more important in collectivistic cultures such as China and Japan.

The purpose of this research project was to explore these questions and add insights into the Career Development Practices that are most strongly related to career satisfaction, the role that organisational support can play, and how these relationships might vary across different global regions.

The research

Survey participants

A career development survey called the CareerPulse™ was completed by 2870 respondents from 73 different nations. This tool was a part of Career Innovation's larger Career Portal online-platform (The Career Innovation Company, 2016). The average age was 39 and 47% were female. Job positions

included senior leaders (16%), managers (23%), and individual contributors (60%).

Respondents rated the extent to which they used each of the Career Development Practices (CDPs) including: (a) knowing oneself (4 items); (b) stretching oneself (4 items); (c) adapting to change (6 items); (d) spotting opportunities (3 items); (e) building a network (5 items); (f) building one's brand (6 items); and (g) reflecting/planning (6 items). In addition, the respondents reported the organisational support they received (3 items) that focused on the feedback provided and potential future career opportunities within the organisation. Finally, respondents reported their career satisfaction across a number of dimensions (11 items) including financial rewards, doing work one enjoys, meaning and purpose in one's work, growth opportunities, and work/life balance.

Upon completion of the CareerPulse™ inventory, participants were given feedback on their survey results. This included information regarding their strengths, areas for growth, and practical steps for developing their skills in each of the career adaptive practice areas.



Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation with Career Satisfaction

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)	Correlation with Career Satisfaction
Knowing oneself	3.26	.80	.68	.53**
Stretching oneself	3.16	.85	.67	.48**
Adapting to change	3.62	.70	.70	.39**
Spotting opportunities	2.69	.99	.66	.55**
Building a network	3.11	.91	.81	.58**
Building one's brand	2.55	.92	.83	.39**
Reflection/planning	2.89	.90	.83	.43**
Organisational support	2.61	.99	.66	.60**
Career satisfaction	3.25	.70	.84	

Note: ** = Statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level indicating that there is less than a 1 in 100 chance that the correlation was due to random chance.

Results

Career development practices and career satisfaction

To begin, the author explored which Career Development Practices were used most often by employees and the extent to which they predicted overall career satisfaction. Table 1 summarises these results.

The results suggest that building one's brand, spotting opportunities, and reflection/planning are the least used career practices. Adapting to change, knowing oneself and stretching oneself are used more often. This is interesting information but takes on significantly more meaning when the correlations with career satisfaction are considered because the least used practices may not prove to be the most impactful. The most potent methods for raising career satisfaction are not to focus on the lowest scores, but rather on the scores which are most statistically connected to career satisfaction as seen in Table 1. This table suggests that organisational support, and an employees' ability to build their network and spot opportunities correlate strongest with career satisfaction and therefore should be our areas of interest.

Career practices and organisational support

Additional analyses were run using a statistical method called hierarchical linear modelling to assess the overall contribution of all seven Career Development Practices together and then to assess the extent to which organisational support added further benefit. The analyses indicated that the Career Development Practices accounted for 40% of the variance in the career satisfaction. When Organisational Support was added, it accounted for an additional 5% of the variance. As a final step, the interaction of the two variables were assessed. The results indicated that organisational support did compensate for most of the Career Development Practices, but the effect was only for networking and knowing one's self; that is, organisational support could help compensate for employees who are weak in these areas.

As a whole, these results suggest that individuals can proactively drive their careers by learning and adopting

career development practices that are related to their career satisfaction, but organisations also have an important role to play in nurturing career satisfaction.

Career practices and global regions

As part of the survey, respondents indicated the countries where they resided, allowing us to group the respondents into global regions. How to best group employees is of course a complex endeavour. For example, Asian nations differ significantly in their cultural profiles. Furthermore, more responses were available from some countries (e.g., the United Kingdom, the United States) than others. A series of analyses were therefore conducted to identify meaningful, relatively homogenous global groupings. Analyses were then run to assess the extent of commonality in career development practices (mean values and correlational relationships with career satisfaction scores) across regional countries. In addition, Hofstede's cultural dimensions (2010) were consulted to select countries that could be combined. In the end, six country/regions groups were formed: the United Kingdom (n=1687), the United States (n=200), Western and Central Europe (n=397), the Middle East (n=162), China not including Hong Kong (n=70) and Central/South America (n=62). Some who participated were not able to combine into these regional groupings (n=292).

Table 2 summarises how often the career development practices were used within each region. The relative level of scores is shaded with higher scores showed in white and lower scores in darker grey. A clear pattern emerges. Career Development Practices in the UK, US and Europe typically are much lower than in the other global regions with especially lower scores in the areas of building one's brand and organisational support. This is counter to what one might expect in what is commonly described as an individualistic, self-promoting culture like the US (Hofstede, 2010). For the UK, US, and European nations, the only relative higher score appears to be in the area of adapting to change, but even these scores are relatively lower when compared to employees in the Middle East, China and central/South America. While the regions representing most of the sample (UK, US, Europe) scored lower, this is more likely a function

Table 2.
Career Development Practice Mean Scores by Region

	UK (n=1687)	US (n=200)	Europe (n=397)	Middle East (n=162)	China (n=70)	Central and South America (n=62)
Stretching oneself	3.02	3.12	3.27	3.73	3.71	3.65
Knowing oneself	3.11	3.34	3.30	3.88	3.83	3.74
Adapting to change	3.46	3.66	3.73	4.19	4.06	4.01
Spotting opportunities	2.91	3.04	2.98	3.82	3.79	3.71
Building a network	2.93	3.29	3.07	3.75	3.86	3.73
Building one's brand	2.31	2.50	2.60	3.62	3.51	3.12
Reflection / planning	2.68	2.98	2.95	3.66	3.76	3.50
Organisational support	2.39	2.71	2.62	3.33	3.55	3.30
Career satisfaction	3.14	3.35	3.27	3.56	3.69	3.54

Note: Darker shading indicates relatively low scores, lighter shading indicates moderate scores, and white indicates relatively higher scores.



of regional attributes than the region's proportionate representation as the scores in Table 2 display regional aggregate averages.

A second question was also explored: which career development practices are most predictive of career satisfaction within each region? This is an important issue for employees, career counsellors and organisations. Given limited time and resources, what is the best place to invest one's time and energy? To answer this question, a statistical technique called relative weights analysis was used to assess the proportionate ability each career development has in explaining career satisfaction (see Table 3).

Overall, results indicate more consistency than difference across the regions. Across our global sample, one can hardly go wrong by focusing on networking, spotting opportunities, and knowing one's self. However, the order does differ and the weights do as

well. For example, in the US, networking and knowing oneself are similar in their importance. By contrast, in the Middle East, networking and spotting opportunities are important with networking being much more important.

Conclusions

While the world is becoming more dynamic and change-orientated, there are proactive practices that both people and organisations can put into place to navigate this new reality. Three things are clear: (1) Career Development Practices which can be learned and developed are important and related to career satisfaction; (2) Organisations have an important role to play in creating the conditions where employees can utilise and grow these skills; and (3) The Career Practices show a number of consistencies across regions, while there are noteworthy differences.

Table 3.

Top Career Development Practice Drivers by Global Region (Relative Weights Analysis)

Region	Top Career Adaptive Practice Drivers	Relative Weight
Overall (n=2870)	Network	26.6
	Spot Opportunities	22.6
	Know Yourself	15.8
UK (n=1687)	Network	28.6
	Spot Opportunities	24.1
	Know Yourself	17.9
US (n=200)	Network	27.1
	Spot Opportunities	21.4
	Know Yourself	19.5
Europe (n=397)	Network	30.3
	Spot Opportunities	24.5
	Know Yourself	13.0
Middle East (n=162)	Network	22.7
	Spot Opportunities	16.6
	Know Yourself	15.4
China (n=70)	Network	22.4
	Spot Opportunities	19.6
	Know Yourself	16.9
Central and South America (n=62)	Network	23.7
	Spot Opportunities	20.2
	Know Yourself	17.7

Note: Relative weights indicate the proportionate ability each CDP has in explaining career satisfaction.



From our study, the first finding suggests that building a network, spotting opportunities and knowing oneself are the most strongly related to career satisfaction.

Interestingly, these are not the areas where employees scored the lowest. This suggests that employees, organisations and career counsellors should not necessarily focus on areas where people are weak, but instead concentrate on career development practices that can bring the biggest impact as seen in their statistical connection to career satisfaction. Secondly, this study found that organisational support also matters. Organisational developmental practices and

the support they provide have important roles to play in enhancing employees' career satisfaction.

Finally, the results suggest that mean scores on the career practices may vary by region, but the practices that are most strongly related to career satisfaction are relatively consistent across the global regions. For example, networking practices were in the top two predictors across all global regions. Nevertheless, there were subtle differences such as the variation of the dimensions' relative weights in predicting career satisfaction by region. Therefore, some practices are

always valuable (e.g., networking) but local context can make a difference.

Practical implications

A final analysis was conducted to identify the specific items across all of the scales that were most strongly related to career satisfaction. Table 4 summarises the results. For individuals, the top actions included taking time to recharge, finding people who will challenge one to think in new ways, and surrounding oneself with people who can provide relational support. For organisations, the top actions included helping employees to see future career opportunities within the organisation, ensuring that managers take time to talk to employees about their careers, and providing feedback to employees about potential new roles in the company.

Table 4.
Top Individual and Organisational Items that Predict Career Satisfaction

For Individual	For Organisations
I take enough time to recharge my energy levels and avoid burnout.	I can see future career opportunities for me in this organisation.
I have people who will stretch me to think in new and different ways.	My manager takes the time to talk to me about my career.
I have people who will provide me with friendly support.	I receive feedback on my potential for new roles.

Note: Items are listed in order of their ability to predict career satisfaction.

Limitations

A few important limitations should be noted when considering this research. First of all, this study was correlational in nature so causality cannot be inferred. Future work is needed to help employees build these skills and then assess the extent to which they causally impact later career satisfaction. Secondly, other outcomes such as job performance, future employability, and turnover should be also considered.

As noted at the beginning of the paper, enhancing employee career satisfaction is critical when talented employees are central to an organisation’s success. Building a strong, resilient, satisfied workforce is a worthy outcome on its own! However, future work should consider other additional career outcomes. Finally, this study stands apart in its ability to study career practices with a large sample of employees across global regions. The results should still be interpreted with caution given the non-random sample of employees. Generalising the regional results should be done with restraint.

Final thoughts

Moving into a practical application for current times, the workplace is often a fast-moving environment. There is a need to equip both the organisation and the employee with career development behaviour that will increase their adaptability and resilience. The career development practices outlined in this article, offer a way to help all employees not only survive, but also thrive in an increasingly connected world.



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