

Personality Types and Career Success among Malaysian Managers

Mohamed Sulaiman*, Ismila Che Ishak** and K. Shamuganathan***

This paper attempts to investigate the relationships between personality types and career success. The big five personality types are used to represent personality. Career success is measured by the integration of the dimensions of salary, position and age. A sample of 111 managers from the private sector provided data for this cross-sectional survey. It appears that all the five personality types; conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, emotional stability, and openness to experience are positively related to career success to varying degrees.

Field of Research: Human Resource Management

Key words: Personality types, Career success, Malaysian managers

1. Introduction

Why are some managers more successful than others? This is an intriguing question among individuals and those who manage them. An understanding of the success factors will enable employees to have a clearer focus on their career management. Career success is a concern for both individuals as well as organizations, because employees' success eventually contributes to organizational success. The disparity in achieving career success gives rise to issues related with the work environment. Those successful are seen to have more wealth, power and respect by society. Those less successful, especially among the same age group may find that they are left out of the rat race and feel frustrated, which may give rise to related problems such as early exit, looking for new jobs, or even deviant behaviour.

Understanding the factors that predict career success is a topic that interests individuals as well as organizations (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Judge & Ilies, 2002; Ng, Eby, Sorensen & Feldman, 2005). As more organizations encourage employees to manage their own careers, these individuals have sought guidance on how to do this effectively. At the same time organizations continue to have an interest in identifying the factors that predict career success in order to effectively select and develop high potential employees. Given the importance of careers to both individuals and organizations there is a need to examine the factors that influence career success (Judge, Cable, Boudreau & Bretz, 1995, Hertz & Donovan, 2002).

*Professor Emeritus Mohamed Sulaiman, Department of Business Administration, International Islamic University Malaysi, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: Mohamed.sulaiman@yahoo.com

**Ismila Che Ishak, Malaysian Institute of Marine Engineering & Technology, University Kuala Lumpur, Lumut, Perak, Malaysia. Email: ismila@mimet.unikl.edu.my

***K. Shamuganathan, General Manager, Human Resources Department, Tradewinds Plantations Bhd, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: shamu@tpb.com.my

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An examination of the variables that influence career success shows that there a wide variety of factors that contribute to a person's advancement in career. Ng, Eby, Sorenson & Feldman (2005) classified these factors into four categories, namely: human capital, organization sponsorship, socio-demographic status, and stable individual differences (for example personality). This study focuses on only one variable, i.e the influence of individual differences toward career success.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Career Success

Career success is defined by Ng, Eby, Sorenson and Feldman (2005) as the accumulated positive work and psychological outcomes resulting from one's work experiences. They operationalized career success in two ways. The first is the objective or extrinsic measure of career success, which includes salary attainment, the number of promotions and position level (Judge, et al, 1995). The second method of evaluating career success is through subjective or intrinsic measure, such as job and career satisfaction. These capture the individuals' subjective judgement about their career achievements. Poon (2004) defined career success as the accumulation of achievements (real or perceived) arising from work experiences, which can be measured objectively or subjectively. Objective career success takes a third person perspective and subjective career success refers to a person's own internal perspective of success. Recently Ballout (2009) studied the relationship between career success and career commitment, which was found to be positively related. This study uses an integrated objective measure, as career success index, which will be explained below.

2.2 Personality Traits

Personality traits have been shown to influence performance and career directions (Mount, Barrick & Strauss, 1994; Furnham, 2002; Schneider & Hough, 1995).

McShane and Von Glinow (2008) define personality as 'the relatively stable pattern of behaviours and consistent internal states that explain a person's behavioural tendencies'. These behaviours of individuals in relation to their bosses, workmates and external parties such as customers, suppliers and other external parties would certainly influence outcomes of these behaviours including career success or failure. A number of studies indicated that personality traits influence or can be used to predict future career status or income, for example, Harrell (1972) (cited in Stagner (1976). It was found that income status of graduates was effectively predicted by personality traits. Mount et al (2005) posits that personality traits are one of the major non-cognitive domains in the field of psychology that influence numerous outcomes associated with work and life success. Personality effects behaviour through motivational processes and this would impact on the individual's success in career and life. They influence the choices individuals make about which tasks and activities to engage in, how much effort to exert on those tasks, and how long to persist with those tasks.

Personality types have categorized in a number of ways. The most prominent categorization of personality is perhaps the one proposed by McRea (1992) which is often referred to as the Big Five. Jalilvand (2000) found that personality types affect

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a person's goal-oriented behaviour and decision making. This study uses the Big Five personality types as predictors of career success.

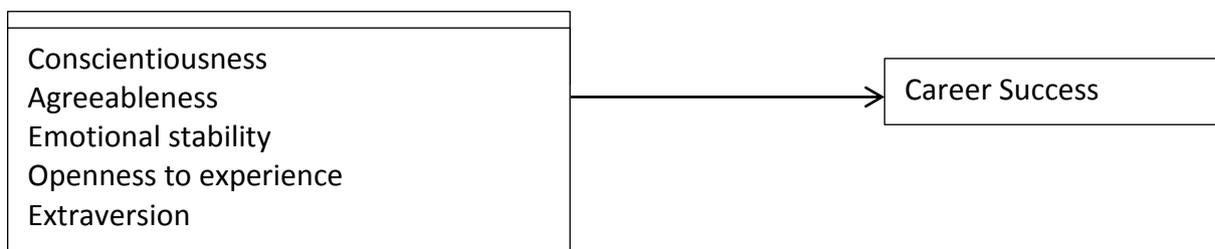
Digman (1990) suggested that personality is represented by five dimensions which are: conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness to experience, and extraversion. Neuroticism is the opposite of emotional stability and for the purposes of this study neuroticism is replaced by emotional stability. Conscientiousness refers to people who are careful, dependable, responsible and have a will to succeed. Agreeableness refers to traits of courteousness, good-natured, empathy and caring. Emotional stability includes people who are poised, calm and secure. The dimension of openness to experience refers to the extent to which people are sensitive, flexible, creative, and curious. Extroversion characterizes people who are outgoing, talkative, sociable and assertive.

These personality traits affect work related behaviour and job performance to varying degrees ((Judge & Ilies, 2002). People who are emotionally stable tend to work better than others in high stress situations. High agreeableness persons tend to handle customer relations and conflict situations better. Conscientious employees tend to set higher goals and are more motivated (Mount & Barrick, 1995). By implication these conclusions seem to support the idea that personality traits or types are related to career success. This forms the main objective of this study.

3. Research Framework

Based on the literature above the following framework is built to guide the study. The general hypothesis is personality types significantly influence career success of managers.

Figure 1: Research Framework



The sub-hypotheses are:

- H1.1: Conscientiousness personality type positively influences career success
- H1.2: Agreeableness personality type positively influences career success
- H1.3: Emotional stability personality type positively influences career success
- H1.4: Extraversion personality type positively influences career success
- H1.5: Openness to experience personality type positively influences career success.

4. Methodology

This study uses the survey method to collect data at one point in time. A questionnaire was prepared based on measurements used by previous researchers. The personality questionnaire (The Big Five Inventory of Goldberg) cited by Srivastava (2006) was adapted for the data collection on personality.

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Career success in this study uses an index created from three variables, i.e age, salary level and job position. Ng et al. (2005) state that those who earn higher salaries and get promoted faster are regarded to be more successful. People have a tendency to compare themselves with others. Obtaining higher salaries and more promotions relative to others are likely to enhance one's perception of success, because wealth and social standing are valued in society. Similarly those who attain higher salaries at a younger age would be regarded as more successful compared to those who get the same salary or position at a later age. Position or job title is another factor which can represent success. While these are extrinsic factors of success, they form tangible achievements which lead to career satisfaction.

5. Findings

5.1 Career Success Index

For this study career success is measured as an index of three factors: age, salary, and position. The index is created as indicated in the tables 1, 2 and 3 below. Table 1 shows that, if the respondent is 31 to 35, he or she would score 5 compared to a person who is 46 to 50 who would score only 2. Similarly, table 2 shows the index scores for position. An executive or section head would score 1, while a senior manager will score 4. Table 3 shows score for salary level. A person who draws a salary of between RM 2001 and 4000 will score 2, while a person who gets a salary of RM 8001 to 10,000 will get a score of 5.

Table 1: Index for Age

Age	Index Score
25 and below	7
26 - 30	6
31 - 35	5
36 - 40	4
41 - 45	3
46 - 50	2
51 and above	1

Table 2: Index for Position

Position	Index score
Executive/section head	1
Assistant manager	2
Manager	3
Senior Manager	4
Director	5
General Manager/Managing Director	6
President/CEO	7

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Table 3: Index for Salary level

Salary	Index score
RM 2000 and below	1
RM 2001 - 4000	2
RM 4001 - 6000	3
RM 6001 - 8000	4
RM 8001 – 10,000	5
RM 10,001 – 12,000	6
RM 12001 and above	7

Career success index is calculated using the above index scores. Career success index = age score x position score x salary score. From this formulae the career success score will range from a minimum of 1 i.e. 1 x 1 x1 to a maximum of 343 i.e. 7 x 7 x 7.

The dependent variable is operationalized as an index because concrete data is preferred to enable to establish degrees of success; each respondent can be given a success index quite objectively. As an example, the calculation for the scores of success index will be as in table 4 below.

Table 4: Calculation of Career Success Scores

Respon dent	Age	Salary	Position	Age index	Salary index	Position index	Calculation Career Success Score	Career Success Score
A	36	11,000	General Manager	4	6	6	4x6x6	144
B	46	5500	Manager	2	3	3	2x3x3	18
C	38	7000	Senior Manager	4	4	4	4x4x4	64

From table 4 it could be seen that Mr A is the most successful with a score of 144, while Mr C is somewhat successful with a score of 64 and Mr B is lagging behind at a score of only 18.

5.2 Questionnaire and Pilot Study

The questionnaire on Personality was adapted from Srivastava (2006), plus the questionnaire on the individual and the organization. It was pilot tested on 20 respondents in an organization where one the researchers was working. The feedback from the respondents seemed to indicate that they did not face difficulties in understanding, but commented that there were some repetitions. The questionnaire was amended accordingly.

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5.3 Population and Sample

The population of the study are managerial and executive level employees in the private sector of Malaysia as the unit of analysis is the individual manager. Sixty large companies in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Ipoh and Seremban were contacted for agreement to participate in this study. Five sets of questionnaires were given to each company (through the Human Resource Manager) to be distributed to executives and managers of various age groups and levels. The distribution and collection of the questionnaire were done both by post and by hand. Out of 300 distributed to 60 companies only 111 were returned, giving a response rate of 29%.

Table 5: Profile of Respondents and Companies

		Frequency	%
Age	51 and above	18	16%
	46 – 50	24	22
	41 – 45	21	19
	36 – 40	12	11
	30 – 35	18	16
	26 – 30	15	13
	25 and below	3	3
Position	Executive	27	24
	Asst. Manager	6	5
	Manager	21	19
	Senior Manager	27	24
	Director	12	11
	General Manager/MD	18	16
	President/CEO	0	
Salary level	RM 2000 & below	9	8
	2001 – 4000	27	24
	4001 – 6000	15	14
	6001 – 8000	24	22
	8001 – 10,000	9	8
	10,001 – 12,000	0	0
	12,001 & above	27	24
Related to owner	Yes	0	0
	No	111	100
Educational level	SPM/MCE	9	8
	Diploma	21	19
	Bachelor's Degree	51	46
	Master/Post grad	30	27
Gender	Male	81	73
	Female	30	27
Years worked	Less than 2	3	3
	2 – 5	15	14
	5 – 10	18	16
	Above 10 years	75	68
Company Size (employees)	11 – 100	3	3
	101 – 200	6	5
	201 – 500	54	49
	501 – 1000	45	41
	1001 - 3000	3	3

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Table 4 shows that data were obtained from 111 respondents representing medium to large companies. Most (90 %) of the sample were drawn from companies employing 200 to 1000 staff (medium to large). In terms of age, the sample seems to be evenly distributed, with 41% in the 41 to 50 age group. For position there no CEOs or presidents in the sample; 43% were in the positions of manager or senior manager. For salary level the range RM 10,000 to 12,000 were not represented, but the rest were there.

The questionnaire also specifically asked whether the respondent was related to the owner, the result showed that no respondent was related to the owner. This was to ensure that favouritism due blood relationship was eliminated.

Two other variables are also captured in this study and these are satisfaction level with current career achievement and comparing career achievement with others. These two variables are used to check for their correlations with the calculated career success index. The data on these variables are shown in table 6.

Table 6: Satisfaction with Current Career Achievement

Variable	Items	Frequency	%
Satisfaction with Current Career Achievement	Totally not satisfied	9	8
	Not Satisfied	33	30
	Moderately satisfied	42	38
	Very satisfied	27	24
Comparing Career achievement with others	Much worse than them	12	11
	Worse than them	24	35
	Same as them	21	19
	Better than them	39	35
	Much better than them	15	14

Table 6 shows that the respondents represent wide spectrum of experiences from those who are dissatisfied with their career advancement (38%) and those who are satisfied or very satisfied (62%). Comparing their achievements with others, 46% viewed themselves as achieving below their cohorts, while 49% said they achieved better or much better.

A Pearson correlation was conducted on the three main variables representing career success, i.e. Career Success index, satisfaction with current career achievement and comparing career achievement with others. The results are shown in table 7.

Table 7: Correlation with Career Success Index

	Satisfaction with Career	Comparing career with others	Career success index
Satisfaction with career achievement	1		
Comparing career achievement with others	.83 (.00)	1	
C.S. Index	.62 (.00)	.64 (.00)	1

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Table 7 shows that satisfaction with career achievement, comparing career achievement with others and Career Success index are highly and significantly correlated. This shows that career success index calculated is a good representation of career achievement and satisfaction.

5.4 Correlation between personality traits and career success

Table 8 shows the correlation between personality traits and career success. It shows that extroversion is significantly related to career success ($r = .447$, $p = .01$), conscientiousness is strongly related to career success ($r = .624$, $p = .01$) and openness is weakly related to career success ($r = .212$, $p = .05$). Agreeableness is not related to career success.

Table 8: Correlation between personality traits and career success

Variables	Extroversion	Agree	Conscientiousness	Emotion	Openness
Extroversion	1				
Agree	-.488**	1			
Consc.	.671**	-.476**	1		
Emotion	.102*	-.387**	-.027	1	
Openness	-.279**	.428**	.106**	-.536**	1
Career success	.447**	.023	.624**	-.084	.212**
Mean	4.24	3.23	4.78	2.74	3.08

** = $< .01$, * = $< .05$

Regression results of personality types onto career success

Table 9 shows the regression results of personality types on career success.

Table 9: Regression results of personality types on career success.

Variables	Std beta	T - value	Sig.
Extraversion	.208	13.68	.00
Agreeableness	.459	36.11	.00
Conscientiousness	.718	44.42	.00
Emotional stability	.135	11.19	.00
Openness to experience	.055	3.85	.00
R sq = .553			
Adj R sq = .553			
F-value = 1146.44			
Sig = .000			

It may be seen from table 9 that the model is significant and is able to explain 55% of the variances in career success. All the variables of personality traits are significant, in other words all the hypotheses are supported; but the most important ones are conscientiousness ($r = .718$, $p = .00$), agreeableness ($r = .459$, $p = .00$) and extraversion ($r = .208$, $p = .00$). Emotional stability is also significant ($r = .135$, $p = .00$) but openness to experience is weakly significant ($r = .055$, $p = .00$).

6. Summary and Conclusions

It is found that all the personality traits have positive correlations with career success but conscientiousness and agreeableness have the strongest correlations with career success. These are obviously essential characteristics for successful managers. However, we note that agreeableness on its own is not significantly related ($r=.023$) to career success, it seems to work only in conjunction with other variables. In other words, being a 'yes man' without substance does not always work. These results support the views and findings of Barrick & Mount (2005) and Ng et al (2005).

The finding of this study highlights that it is useful for managers to understand that in order to succeed in their careers they have to be first and foremost conscientious about their jobs and responsibilities. Second, they have to be an agreeable person especially in the Malaysian context, where a quarrelsome or argumentative personality is often frowned upon. A little bit of extraversion can help. Openness to new experience personality or a person who likes to experiment is very weakly related to success. Top managers in Malaysia can be rather conservative.

Another contribution of this study is the use of career success index to represent career success. Career success index was created from three variables age, salary and position, which was found to be strongly correlated with career satisfaction and career achievement. This index is an objective measure, which may be easily replicated for future studies.

From the perspective organizations, the findings may provide some guide for the selection of new employees and training of existing ones. In order to enhance career success the selection and training should emphasize the traits which are strongly related to career success.

Overall the study indicates that personality plays a significant role in career success of managers. In order to succeed they have develop certain traits which are compatible with organizational success.

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