

# Chapter 11

## Exploring Diverse Personal Definitions of Career Success in the Polish Labor Market within a Human-centric Management Framework

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### 11.1. Introduction

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In the previous two chapters, we focused on various technological solutions that support activities undertaken in HRM. Such solutions should consider the expectations and needs of employees, which determine employee loyalty and job performance (discussed in Chapter 2) and shape employee work engagement and job satisfaction (Chapter 5). It is crucial to consider these issues in light of the size and type of organization as well as generational differences, as demonstrated in Chapters 6-8.

Another important issue is employees' understanding of career success, which is one of the key concepts in understanding individuals' labor market decisions and behaviors, which we focus on in this chapter. What a person considers to be career success is connected with their main characteristics such as age (Dries et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2022), gender (Dyke and Murphy, 2006; Fernandez et al., 2023), socioeconomic background (Andersen and Stapf, 2022; Fernandez et al., 2023; Hennequin, 2007) or country of origin (Benson et al., 2020; Kaše et al., 2018), however it is also affected by their unique experiences and labor market trajectory (Nugin and Onken, 2010). Nevertheless, most existing research relies on operational definitions prepared by the research team, not taking into consideration how study participant understand the term.

Addressing the concept of career success is crucial as it influences not only individuals but also the overall vitality of the organization. Understanding these personal definitions of success within the wider context (c.f. Kaše et al., 2020) is essential, especially from a human-centric management perspective. This paradigm shifts focus from treating employees as mere resources to recognizing them as key stakeholders, with distinct needs and aspirations. This alignment is essential in today's rapidly evolving work environments, where employee well-being and organizational culture are becoming as significant as economic outcomes. This perspective prioritizes the employee's individual goals (including their personal definitions of career success) and well-being within the organizational context, aiming to harmonize them with broader organizational objectives. By focusing on human-centric values, organizations commit to fostering environments, where employees can achieve both personal and professional growth, recognizing that each individual's perception of career success can significantly influence their motivation and work-related decisions.

In the above context, **the goal of this chapter** is to identify and analyze definitions of career success present in the Polish labor market and to interpret them from the perspective of the human-centric management paradigm. The findings in this area will also help formulate practical recommendations for organizations, that want to be perceived as human-centric.

## 11.2. The Theoretical Framework for the Study

Career success is one of the main concepts influencing and shaping individuals' labor market behaviors, decisions and aspirations. It is also a widely researched topic for sociology, psychology and management studies.

However, the majority of the existing studies concern factors increasing or decreasing individuals' chances of achieving career success without defining the concept. Studies either use operationalizations coming from the researchers, not the study participants, like income and job satisfaction (e.g. Danner et al., 2019), annual income and managerial level (e.g. Frear et al., 2018) or ask specific questions about circumstances of achieving (or not) career success without inquiring what career success means to the respondents/ interviewees. The fact that the term belongs simultaneously to scientific and everyday language complicates the situation further.

Moreover, the terms occupational success, career success and job success can sometimes be used interchangeably. Polish term 'sukces zawodowy' is a close translation of both occupational success and career success. In this study, we will focus on the most general meaning of career success as the success in occupational life/ success achieved in the labor market.

In terms of defining career success, there are three main threads: subjectivity/ objectivity, level of definition and its temporal dimension. Firstly, in defining and measuring career success, we can distinguish between objective and subjective aspects (Judge et al., 1995; Zhou et al., 2013). Subjective success is an internal, psychological phenomenon based on individuals' feelings, attitudes and evaluations (Gunz and Heslin, 2005; Ng et al., 2005; Shockley et al., 2015). On the other hand, objective success can be measured with observable indicators such

as income, place in the organizational hierarchy or size of the managed team (Gunz and Heslin, 2005). Subjective and objective aspects of success can concur in the individual's occupational biography, which would usually be the most desirable situation. However, the opposite (achieving only subjective or only objective success) is also possible (Abele et al., 2011; Korman et al., 1981; Nicholson and Waal-Andrews, 2005).

As for the level of definitions, success can be defined both on the individual level and as a broader social norm present in society or a social group at the given time. Several international studies have shown how definitions of career success vary between societies, depending on their history, culture and economic development (Benson et al., 2020; Kaše et al., 2018). Career success can also be defined on the meso-level of different social groups. Ones most likely to create and use those definitions are the occupational groups, especially when the general society-wide definition of success does not match their particular situation (cf. Coles, 2018; Eith et al., 2010). On the other end of the spectrum, each individual's unique experiences and values shape how they define the concept of success for their own occupational life.

Finally, the time dimension of the definition of career success is the least researched. Analyzing the concept in connection with the concept of the career, understood as a longitudinal phenomenon happening over time, success can be seen as an 'end result' of the career or the 'destination' towards which the career led. However, this operationalization relates mainly to the traditional career model (Collin and Watts, 2000), in which individuals' occupational trajectory is limited to one occupation or specialization (or even one workplace). This is reflected in some definitions, such as: 'Career success is an outcome of a person's career experiences. Career success may be defined as the accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person's work experience over time' (Arthur et al., 2005, p. 179) or 'the real or perceived achievements individuals have accumulated as a result of their work experiences' (Judge et al., 1995, p. 621).

However, new career models, which assume the possibility of changes in occupations, workplaces and motivations in the occupational lives also bring about new understandings of career success, as to mention kaleidoscope career (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005), protean career (Hall, 2004), boundaryless career (Arthur et al., 1989) or life-career rainbow (Super, 1980). They also provoke the question on whether career success can be achieved more than once in a lifetime. Januszkiewicz (2012) argues that the new career paradigm means that individuals strive to achieve success multiple times in their (occupational) life, seeing it more as a defining point of the career, not the culmination of the career as a whole.

Besides the question about the (non)recurring nature of career success, the time dimension also concerns its continuity. In this context, another question arises, namely whether the concept describes one-off achievements (finishing a project, being promoted, obtaining a reward) or more longitudinal states (desirable characteristics of a job position such as high income or occupational prestige). In our previous qualitative study of Polish migrants' definitions and experiences of career success, we proposed the position-based model of career success to describe the (dominant in our sample) situation where career success is defined through continuous situations where a person is satisfied with different aspects of their occupational situation (Czeranowska, 2023).

The theoretical background presented in this section will be used to interpret findings from the empirical study and help formulate practical recommendations for organizations, based on aligning organizational strategies with individual definitions of career success. Such alignment not only supports the individual’s career development, but also strengthens the organization’s capacity to adapt and thrive in a changing economic landscape, making the human-centric management approach a strategic imperative in contemporary organizational practice.

### 11.3. The Methodics of the Conducted Empirical Research

Our analysis is based on data from the project ‘Definitions and experiences of career success in Polish society – a quantitative study’ co-financed by the Ministry of Education and Science subsidies for maintaining and developing the didactic and research potential of the SWPS University. The project aimed to analyze how career success is defined and experienced in the Polish labor market. We used quantitative methodology; a CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) survey was conducted in June 2023. The questionnaire included questions about definitions of career success and respondents’ own experiences with achieving (or not achieving) career success and the impact it had on their lives.

The survey was conducted on the internet panel. We used random quota sampling, with quotas according to representation in the Polish population for gender, age and size of locality of residence. In total, 1047 panel participants took part in the study.

**Table 24.** Facets of career success

Type	Facets
Good working conditions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) High income</li> <li>2) A lot of freedom to carry out professional tasks</li> <li>3) Work-life balance</li> <li>4) Enjoying one’s job</li> <li>5) Good personal relations in the workplace, working in a friendly atmosphere</li> <li>6) Job stability</li> </ol>
Power and influence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) High position in the organizational hierarchy</li> <li>2) Exercising power, being the person who makes important decisions in the workplace</li> <li>3) Recognition in the professional environment, being an expert</li> <li>4) Managing a large team</li> <li>5) Being an expert known outside the professional environment, media presence</li> <li>6) Running own business, ‘being one’s own boss’</li> </ol>
Self-realization and social utility	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Performing work that is important to society, social usefulness of one’s job</li> <li>2) Prestigious profession</li> <li>3) Having high qualifications</li> <li>4) Opportunities to develop at work, continuous improvement of qualification</li> <li>5) Having a job one is passionate about, in line with their interests</li> <li>6) Achieving high standards in the work performed</li> </ol>

Source: project ‘Definitions and experiences of career success in Polish society – a quantitative study’, own elaboration.

Our respondents were asked about their definition of career success with a question: ‘People define career success in different ways. We would like to ask what elements are important to you in assessing whether someone has achieved career success. Please select the five most important elements’. They were to choose the five most important elements from the list of ‘facets of career success’ prepared on the basis of a literature review. We included 18 facets, which are be grouped into three types: ‘Good working conditions’, ‘Power and influence’ and ‘Self-realization and social utility’. Those three types are presented in Table 24.

## 11.4. The Empirical Research Findings

The most frequently chosen options for the question about the definition of career success were *Enjoying one’s job* with *High income* and *Job stability*. Those three answers were chosen by over half of the sample. All of them can be linked to the ‘Good working conditions’ type of defining career success. The three least frequently chosen options were all connected to the objective dimension of career success, representing the ‘Power and influence’ type of career success definitions: *High position in the organizational hierarchy*, *Being an expert known outside the professional environment*, *media presence* and *Managing a large team* were all chose by less than 10% of the respondents. Frequencies of all answers are presented in Table 25.

**Table 25.** The ranking of career success facets based on multiple choice question

Facets	% of respondents
Enjoying one’s job	56.9
High income	53.2
Job stability	50.2
Work-life balance	47.1
Having a job one is passionate about, in line with their interests	41.5
Good personal relations in the workplace, working in a friendly atmosphere	38.7
Independence in professional tasks	31.0
Opportunities to develop at work, continuous improvement of qualifications	29.4
Having high qualifications	26.7
Recognition in the professional environment, being an expert	24.2
Achieving high standards in the work performed	19.4
Performing work that is important to society, social usefulness of one’s job	17.2
Running own business, „being one’s own boss”	14.6
Prestigious profession	12.6
Exercising power, being the person who makes important decisions in the workplace	10.3
High position in the organizational hierarchy	9.80
Being an expert known outside the professional environment, media presence	9.80
Managing a large team	6.80

Source: own empirical research.

**Table 26.** The correlation matrix between variables that constitute elements defining career success

Variables	High income	Social usefulness	High position	Exercising power	Independence in professional tasks	Professional recognition	Managing a large team	Work-life balance	Prestigious occupation	High qualifications	Self-development	Enjoying one's job	Being passionate about job	High work standards	Friendly workplace	Job stability	Running own business	Media presence
High income	1	-.126**	.021	-.078*	-.128**	-.101**	-.021	-.112**	-.030	-.039	-.062*	-.058	-.079*	-.106**	-.139**	.035	-.083**	-.076*
Social usefulness	-.126**	1	-.006	-.005	-.065*	-.098**	-.002	-.105**	-.036	-.075*	.006	-.069*	-.055	.013	-.024	-.098**	-.038	-.057
High position	.021	-.006	1	.109**	-.055	.061*	.089**	-.138**	.068*	.003	-.094**	-.179**	-.122**	.008	-.131**	-.178**	-.010	.095**
Exercising power	-.078*	-.005	.109**	1	-.044	.007	.096**	-.112**	.041	-.028	-.074*	-.200**	-.063*	.032	-.140**	-.152**	.029	.120**
Independence in professional tasks	-.128**	-.065*	-.055	-.044	1	-.056	-.050	-.029	-.068*	-.112**	-.098**	-.029	-.130**	-.073*	-.062*	-.055	.003	-.034
Professional recognition	-.101**	-.098**	.061*	.007	-.056	1	-.010	-.144**	.014	.027	-.115**	-.140**	-.041	.005	-.109**	-.206**	-.006	.076*
Managing a large team	-.021	-.002	.089**	.096**	-.050	-.010	1	-.125**	.126**	.000	-.049	-.111**	-.150**	-.036	-.050	-.142**	.028	.013
Work-life balance	-.112**	-.105**	-.138**	-.112**	-.029	-.144**	-.125**	1	-.139**	-.164**	-.088**	.052	-.015	-.163**	.072*	.047	-.092**	-.138**
Prestigious occupation	-.030	-.036	.068*	.041	-.068*	.014	.126**	-.139**	1	.044	-.119**	-.129**	-.116**	-.033	-.124**	-.146**	.079*	.010
High qualifications	-.039	-.075*	.003	-.028	-.112**	.027	.000	-.164**	.044	1	-.059	-.119**	-.085**	.031	-.192**	-.089**	-.079*	-.004
Self-development	-.062*	.006	-.094**	-.074*	-.098**	-.115**	-.049	-.088**	-.119**	-.059	1	-.069*	-.064*	-.057	-.031	-.053	-.036	-.058
Enjoying one's job	-.058	-.069*	-.179**	-.200**	-.029	-.140**	-.111**	.052	-.129**	-.119**	-.069*	1	-.077*	-.144**	.018	.056	-.055	-.153**
Being passionate about job	-.079*	-.055	-.122**	-.063*	-.130**	-.041	-.150**	-.015	-.116**	-.085**	-.064*	-.077*	1	-.031	-.053	-.068*	-.052	-.070*
High work standards	-.106**	.013	.008	.032	-.073*	.005	-.036	-.163**	-.033	.031	-.057	-.144**	-.031	1	-.117**	-.121**	-.046	.025
Friendly workplace	-.139**	-.024	-.131**	-.140**	-.062*	-.109**	-.050	.072*	-.124**	-.192**	-.031	.018	-.053	-.117**	1	.053	-.162**	-.131**
Job stability	.035	-.098**	-.178**	-.152**	-.055	-.206**	-.142**	.047	-.146**	-.089**	-.053	.056	-.068*	-.121**	.053	1	-.199**	-.152**
Running own business	-.083**	-.038	-.010	.029	.003	-.006	.028	-.092**	.079*	-.079*	-.036	-.055	-.052	-.046	-.162**	-.199**	1	.036
Media presence	-.076*	-.057	.095**	.120**	-.034	.076*	.013	-.138**	.010	-.004	-.058	-.153**	-.070*	.025	-.131**	-.152**	.036	1

Notes:  
Marked correlations are significant at: \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01.

Source: own empirical research.

We also looked at relationships between the elements of career success definitions. As for the binary categorical variables, Pearson’s r correlation coefficient is equal to phi coefficient (Guilford, 1936), we used the Pearson correlation (see Table 26).

We can see that several pairs of answers are correlated. However, all those correlations are weak. The strongest positive correlations are between *Prestigious occupation* and *Managing a large team* ( $r=0.126, p<0.001$ ) and *Being an expert known outside the professional environment, media presence* and *Exercising power, being the person who makes important decisions in the workplace* ( $r=0.120, p<0.001$ ). The strongest negative correlations are between *Recognition in the professional environment, being an expert* and *Job stability* ( $r=-0.206, p<0.001$ ) and *Exercising power, being the person who makes important decisions in the workplace* and *Enjoying one’s job* ( $r=-0.200, p<0.001$ ).

As each respondent was asked to choose five options from the presented 18, we also looked at the sets of answers chosen together. We argue that those sets of career success facets can be treated as ‘personal definitions’ of career success. The most important finding is the uniqueness of those personal definitions – 55.2% of the respondents chose a set of answers that were not repeated throughout the sample. Moreover, only five sets of answers appeared more than ten times in our sample of 1047 persons. The most frequent set of options occurred 21 times (2.01% of the sample). It included *High income, Enjoying one’s job, Work-life balance, Good personal relations in the workplace, working in a friendly atmosphere* and *Job stability*. The five most frequent sets are presented in Table 27.

**Table 27.** Top five most common combinations of career success facets selected by respondents from multiple choice questions

Sets of answers	% of respondents
1. High income + Enjoying one’s job + Work-life balance + Good personal relations in the workplace, working in a friendly atmosphere + Job stability	2.01
2. Enjoying one’s job + Work-life balance + Good personal relations in the workplace, working in a friendly atmosphere + Job stability + Having a job one is passionate about, in line with their interests	1.72
3. Independence in professional tasks + Enjoying one’s job + Work-life balance + Good personal relations in the workplace, working in a friendly atmosphere + Job stability	1.34
4. High income + Independence in professional tasks + Enjoying one’s job + Work-life balance + Job stability	1.34
5. High income + Work-life balance + Enjoying one’s job + Having a job one is passionate about, in line with their interests + Job stability	1.05

Source: own empirical research.

It is important to note that in our multiple-choice questions, respondents chose elements of the definition of career success without ranging them in importance. We may assume that if they were asked to establish a hierarchy of the chosen elements, the diversification of answers may be even higher.

## 11.5. Summary and Final Conclusions

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**The main goal of this chapter** was to analyze the concept of career success in the Polish labor market and to interpret it from the perspective of the human-centric management paradigm. Additionally, our intention was to formulate practical recommendations for organizations that want to be perceived as human-centric. This section will present summary of our analysis, as well as their interpretation and guidelines for organizational practice.

The options chosen for the question about the elements of the definitions of career success were mostly focused on good working conditions. All three most frequently chosen answers (*Enjoying one's job*, *High income* and *Job stability*) were desirable characteristics of a job position. This is consistent with our previous finding from the qualitative study (Czeranowska, 2023) in which career success appeared to be primarily understood longitudinally in terms of achieving a good job position. Moreover, we can see that the most chosen option (*Enjoying one's job*) as well as the third one (*Job stability*) are of the subjective character, while the second (*Income*) represents objective success (Gunz and Heslin, 2005).

As for the set of answers, it is essential to note that the most frequent of them was chosen by only 21 respondents (2.01%), and 55.2% of our sample had chosen a set of answers that was not repeated throughout the sample. This means that there are multiple unique ways of defining career success (*c.f.* Dries, 2011). All correlations between chosen elements of definition of career success are weak, which further confirm unique and personal character of those definitions.

From a human-centric management perspective, these findings suggest that organizations should honor the diversity of employees' motivations and needs. This strategy needs to be based on engaging with employees to understand their unique perspectives and values (*c.f.* Dziuba et al., 2020). By integrating employee feedback into decision-making processes and development plans, organizations can ensure that their strategies are genuinely aligned with the diverse needs and goals of their staff. Such efforts enhance employee engagement and commitment, ultimately cultivating a workplace where career success is both recognized and celebrated in various forms. This approach is also directly beneficial for organizations because empirical research shows that effectively shaping employee work engagement and job satisfaction positively impacts company performance results, including financial outcomes (Stor, 2024).

As the high diversification in the sets of answers (personal definitions of career success) shows the shift towards more personalized and varied interpretations of what constitutes career success, organizations should strive to take employee's different needs into consideration. Incorporating the concept of multiscope employee development (MED) as outlined by Stor (2023a), which integrates various developmental constructs and personal characteristics into a cohesive strategy, could enhance these efforts by providing a more holistic approach to employee growth and career success. Organizations aiming to align with a human-centric framework should adopt personalized and innovative career development programs that recognize and support diverse employee aspirations and definitions of success (*c.f.* Kettunen,



2023). This could involve tailored development paths and recognizing unique contributions and achievements, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach (*c.f.* Lehtonen et al., 2022). These systems should be designed including adequately constructed employee performance appraisal that shape employee performance, which consequently determines company performance results (Stor, 2023b). This is particularly important as empirical research shows that proper talent management within an organization can positively influence organizational outcomes, thereby delivering better financial results, as well as enhancing innovation and the quality of products and services (Stor, 2023c). Additionally, fostering an inclusive workplace culture that values and respects each employee's unique career path can enhance job satisfaction and loyalty. Implementing such practices requires a shift towards more fluid and flexible HR policies that can accommodate the evolving expectations and aspirations of the modern workforce.

To complement these personalized development programs, organizations can implement mechanisms for continuous feedback and regular career planning sessions. These practices enable employees to feel continually supported and appreciated, not only during annual reviews but as an ongoing dialogue. This approach ensures that individual goals and organizational objectives are aligned, fostering a dynamic environment where both employees and the organization thrive together.

The presented study is not without limitations. Due to the limited scope and exploratory character of the research project, the sample that we were able to use is not random – it is, however, a random-quota panel sample, therefore reflects the structure of Polish society in terms of the main socio-demographic factors (gender, age group, size of the locality of residence). Moreover, we chose a closed-ended multiple-choice question to ask about personal definitions of career success in order to be able to categorize the answers. However, as Domański and Sawiński (1991) noted in the case of occupational prestige, which is other very hard to define concept regarding work, open-ended questions may better illustrate which objects are salient and present in public awareness. Therefore, we are aware that asking the same question in another format may uncover different elements of the social reality.

Despite those limitations, our research contributes to the literature by showing a high diversification of ways in which individuals in the Polish labor market define career success. Therefore, we argue that construing a general definition of career success, which would be dominant in the Polish labor market, may be not feasible. In its place, we propose a concept of personal definitions of career success, which are shaped by the individual's unique characteristics, experiences and values.

Our study is of the exploratory character. Possible next steps in analyzing the understanding of career success in the Polish labor market include using mixed or qualitative methodologies to understand how those definitions are created within the context of individuals' values, attitudes and labor market experiences. Moreover, differences between success definitions could be researched in terms of different social groups (especially occupational groups as well as classes). Another promising direction of further research may be connected with links between the concept of career success and different career models

Summarizing our findings, it is evident that the highly diversified and personalized nature of career success definitions demands that organizations adopt a flexible, human-centric management approach. By recognizing the variety in employees' aspirations and integrating their needs and motivations into organizational strategies, companies can foster a supportive work environment that enhances job satisfaction and loyalty. This approach underscores the necessity for dynamic HRM policies that not only accommodate but celebrate individual differences, enabling organizations to thrive in a competitive labor market by nurturing a truly human-focused organizational culture.

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