Chapter 11
Career Success: Employability and the Quality of Work Experiences

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Annelies E. M. van Vianen, Irene E. de Pater, and Paul T. Y. Preenen

Abstract The changing labour market and unpredictability of careers necessitate employees to adopt non-traditional norms of career success and assess their career in terms of employability. We propose that employees could promote their employability specifically through engagement in challenging work experiences. High quality jobs provide employees with these experiences, which stimulate learning and adaptability, affect employees' interests, work attitudes, and competency perceptions, and increase their organisational power and promotability. Whether employees encounter challenge in their job may depend on their own initiatives. Research has shown that intrinsically motivated individuals who are mastery-oriented, and who are self-efficacious and proactive are more likely to involve in challenging tasks than their extrinsically motivated, performance-oriented, low efficacious, and passive counterparts. However, the challenging nature of jobs also depends on factors in the work environment such as the task allocating behaviours of colleagues and supervisors. We conclude that supervisors in particular could promote the challenging experiences, employability, and career success of employees by inducing a learning orientation in employees, delegating tasks, and monitoring the division of challenging tasks among team members. In addition, organisations could foster the making of developmental i-deals with employees and design jobs that are both challenging and attainable.

A. E. M. van Vianen (✉)
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: a.e.m.vanvianen@uva.nl

I. E. de Pater
National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore
e-mail: i.e.depater@nus.edu.sg

P. T. Y. Preenen
Organisation for Applied Scientific Research TNO, The Hague, The Netherlands
e-mail: typ.preenen@belastingdienst.nl

Globalisation and competition compel organisations to regularly adjust their systems, structure, and technology, which impact the careers of employees. Careers no longer progress along a fixed path but instead tend to involve a sequence of relatively short periods in which employees' work activities and roles are stable yet doomed to become obsolete. These periods may or may not connect to each other, both in terms of individual employment and work experiences (Savickas et al. 2009).

This change in conceptualization of careers may not keep pace with the way in which employees envision their career. It is possible that some employees may still reflect on their career with a focus on security, predictability, and a linear perception of a successful career. These employees may adhere to the traditional definition of objective career success, that is, tangible and quantifiable career outcomes such as salary growth and promotion (e.g., Heslin 2005). However, only few people are actually able to advance upwardly in their career (Dries 2011). Alternatively, given the prevalent unpredictability of careers, employees could adopt other norms of career success and assess their careers in terms of personal development, need fulfilment, and the achievement of goals that are personally meaningful. Also, employees could rely on their own personal standards and goals (self-referent subjective success) rather than comparing themselves to a reference group or external standard (other-referent subjective success) (Van Vianen and Klehe 2014).

In the past 15 years, researchers have started to frame career success in terms of employability (e.g., De Vos et al. 2011). Employability has been conceptualised as "the ability to obtain a job and to keep employed, within or outside one's current organisation, for one's present or new customer(s), and with regard to future prospects" (Van der Heijden et al. 2009, p. 156) and as "a form of work specific active adaptation that enables workers to identify and realise career opportunities" (Fugate et al. 2004, p. 16). Individuals who are able to remain employable (gain and retain employment through the optimal use of their competencies) and to adapt to and foresee career transitions will experience more career success than those who lack these abilities.

According to Fugate et al. (2004), employability consists of four interrelated dimensions: career adaptability, human capital, social capital, and career identity. *Career adaptability* is the readiness to cope with current and anticipated tasks, transitions, and traumas in occupational roles and a willingness to explore one's career possibilities (Savickas and Porfeli 2012). Adaptability encompasses four resources: concern (the extent to which individuals look ahead and prepare for what might come next), control (responsibility for shaping the self and the environment through self-discipline, effort, and persistence), curiosity (the exploration of possible selves and alternative scenarios, and reflection on various situations and roles), and confidence (in the ability to actualize one's choices). *Human capital* concerns the experience, training, skills and knowledge that are necessary for finding and keeping a job. *Social capital* refers to individuals' social skills and social network and support that they can draw upon. *Career identity* concerns individuals' work values and motivation to work and the centrality that they place on employment.

Altogether, the literature on employability emphasises that for being successful in one's career, individuals should look ahead, seek for opportunities to further develop their (range of) skills, explore different activities and roles, build confidence, engage in learning, and build a network of supportive relationships, all of which should accord with an individual's own values and goals.

In this chapter we focus on the human capital part of employability, that is, the training and skill development that are necessary for keeping pace with the changes at work and are crucial for career success. There are several ways in which individuals may develop themselves. For example, employees may engage in job-related training in order to strengthen their abilities and skills, or they may obtain higher levels of proficiency by enlarging their experiences within a certain work domain. All these activities help to increase individuals' human capital. However, in this paper we argue that skill development through job-related training will be insufficient to remain employable. Instead, we propose that employees could promote their employability and career success through engagement in challenging activities on the job. Specifically, we propose that engaging in challenging activities will promote learning and development, which help to build human capital, which, in turn, will enhance career success.

In the next paragraph we first address the question of what makes a career successful. Thereafter, we focus on the human capital part of employability and discuss ways in which individuals' human capital can grow. The best way to increase employability and career success is to engage in challenging work experiences because these types of experiences stimulate learning, development and may lead to career adaptability. Optimally, employees themselves should initiate their challenging work experiences. It is, however, more realistic to assume that employees will often need the support and encouragement of their environment. At the end of this chapter, we discuss the role that individuals and organisations have in enhancing employees' employability and career success.

Career Success

Career success has been defined as the accumulated positive work and psychological outcomes resulting from one's work experiences (Seibert and Kraimer 2001). This definition includes two different perspectives on careers, an objective and a subjective perspective. The objective perspective on career success takes the tangible facets of careers into account, such as individuals' income and occupational status. The subjective perspective on career success focuses on how individuals evaluate their career and defines career success in terms of career satisfaction (Ng et al. 2005).

The subjective perspective on career success has received great attention from career researchers as subjective career success is only modestly related to objective career outcomes (salary change, mobility, promotion) while it has a strong impact on people's general life satisfaction and well-being (Erdogan et al. 2012; Lounsbury

et al. 2004; Stumpf and Tymon 2012). Therefore, it is important to know what people mean when they report their career to be successful or not. Do they use objective career success criteria or do they assess career outcomes, for example, on the basis of personal development and growth and the fulfilment of personal needs?

Researchers have measured subjective career success (career satisfaction) in different ways. Some researchers (Nauta et al. 2009) have used a one-item measure ("I am satisfied with my career") whereas others use a measure including items that reflect satisfaction with an individual's career status, present job, and progress toward promotion (e.g., Martins et al. 2002) or a measure covering success with one's career and satisfaction with the progress one has made towards meeting overall career goals, and goals for income, advancement, and the development of new skills. The latter measure, the *Career Satisfaction Scale* developed by Greenhaus and colleagues (Greenhaus et al. 1990), has been used most frequently and has been considered as "the best measure available in the literature" (Judge et al. 1995, p. 497) because it is a broad one-dimensional construct of subjective career success. However, one could wonder whether individuals with different demographic backgrounds (e.g., gender, education, age) conceptualize career success in the way researchers do. When asked directly about their career success would individuals mention factors such as income, status, advancement, and development?

Some studies (Dyke and Murphy 2006; Hofmans et al. 2008) have addressed the possibility that different employees may conceptualize career success in different ways. For example, Dyke and Murphy (2006) explored whether men and women with comparable career attainments would differ in their definition of career success. They found that men defined career success relatively more in terms of material success whereas women more often than men highlighted the importance of relationships and balance between their work and non-work domains. Building on this and related research, Dries et al. (2008) interviewed managers about their careers and asked them to reflect on their career success. The themes that emerged from these interviews were rated by experts, which resulted in a 2 (interpersonal vs. intra-personal) × 2 (achievement vs. affect) dimensional framework of career success (see Table 11.1). Individuals seem to use external and internal sources for establishing their career success and they seem to define success in terms of

Table 11.1 Dimensional framework of career success[a]

	Inter-personal	**Intra-personal**
	External world is source of validation	*The "self" is source of validation*
Achievement	Performance	Self-development
Factual accomplishments	Advancement	Creativity
	Factual contribution	
Affect	Recognition	Security (financial and employment needs)
Feelings and perceptions	Cooperation	
	Perceived contribution	Satisfaction (family and work)

[a]Derived from Dries et al. (2008)

accomplishments and feelings. However, research on career satisfaction has been mostly focused on the inter-personal and less so on the intra-personal indicators of career success (Dries et al. 2008). Notably, individuals seem to use the self as a source when reflecting on criteria such as self-development and the fulfilment of employment needs, which are core to the construct of employability.

In current careers, individuals will be better off when they learn to set their own career goals and standards rather than those of others, because a comparison with others in order to establish one's "objective" career success will be difficult and may lead to frustration because only few people are promoted to higher hierarchical levels (Heslin 2005) or have the opportunity to attain higher incomes (Abele et al. 2011). Moreover, an intra-personal rather than inter-personal orientation, including a focus on self-development and fulfilment of employment needs, may foster employability as this orientation may help to expand one's human capital.

Human Capital

Human capital refers to people's personal, educational, and professional experiences that support their career attainment (Becker 1975). Human capital is expected to contribute to people's value in the market place and researchers, therefore, have related human capital factors to traditional measures of objective career success, such as salary and promotion. Although education and work experiences do relate to these measures of career success, the relationships are modest and inconsistent (e.g., Ng et al. 2005). Other scholars investigated whether human capital is a predictor of (perceived) employability and found a rather weak relationship between formal education and perceived employability, particularly during times of a recession (Berntson et al. 2006), or no relationship between duration of formal training and perceived employability (Wittekind et al. 2010). These findings indicate that human capital in terms of the quantity of capital (e.g., length of education and formal training) has only a marginal influence on individuals' employability and career success.

The reason for the minor contribution of quantitative human capital factors is that individuals with equal amounts of work experience, education, and formal training can differ considerably with respect to the quality of their experiences and learning (De Pater et al. 2009a). Individuals develop their own specialities in their jobs due to their task choices based on specific task preferences and/or because of the assignments they get from their supervisor. The quality of work experiences refers to the richness, variety and breadth of tasks and responsibilities people encounter in their work (Tesluk and Jacobs 1998). The core element of these work experiences is that they challenge employees to explore their capacities and to acquire new skills.

Researchers (e.g., De Pater et al. 2009a; Dong et al. 2014, Preenen et al. 2016; Seibert et al. 2017) have begun to address the role of the *quality* of work experiences for individuals' careers. Their research indicates that challenging work experiences

are not only beneficial for the development of managers but for the development and employability of *all* working individuals.

The Quality of Work: Challenging Experiences

High quality jobs provide employees with challenging experiences that create good opportunities for learning and development and encourage employees to explore and broaden their knowledge, skills, and abilities (McCauley et al. 1999; McCauley et al. 1994). Challenging work experiences are thought of as "the driving force of learning" on the job (McCall et al. 1988, p. 16) and engagement in challenging experiences fosters employees' career attainment (De Pater et al. 2009a; Seibert et al. 2017).

The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) refers to challenge as "a difficult or demanding task, especially one seen as a test of one's abilities or character". The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2004) speaks of "a test of one's abilities or resources in a demanding but stimulating undertaking". Hence, people are challenged if they are faced with a task or activity that is novel, demanding, and stimulating and calls on their ability and determination. Tesluk and Jacobs (1998) mentioned another aspect of challenging experiences that may affect learning and development, that is, their density. Challenging experiences display greater density if employees repeatedly engage in them. It is assumed that frequent engagement in challenging situations stimulates work motivation (Zimmerman et al. 2012), increases employees' self-efficacy (Aryee and Chu 2012; Seibert et al. 2017), and will affect their interest in and preferences for engagement in future learning experiences (Krumboltz 1979; Mitchell and Krumboltz 1990).

The role of challenging experiences has been mainly recognised in the context of management development (e.g., Dragoni et al. 2009, McCauley et al. 1994). In that context, McCauley et al. (1999) identified clusters of job components that represent challenging aspects of work: (a) job transitions, with individuals being confronted with new tasks and situations in which existing tactics and routines are inadequate, (b) creating change, with individuals having a clear goal to change a situation, but a loosely defined role that gives them the freedom to determine how to accomplish the goal, (c) managing at high levels of responsibility, characterised by increased visibility, the opportunity to make a significant impact, dealing with broader and more complex problems and higher stakes, (d) managing boundaries, in which case employees have to work with people over whom they have no direct authority and have to develop strategies for influencing them and gaining their cooperation, and (e) dealing with diversity, when working with people who are different from themselves regarding their values, backgrounds, experiences, and needs. Hence, a task or activity can be qualified as being challenging to the extent that it (a) is novel and asks for non-routine skills and behaviours, (b) tests one's abilities or resources, (c) gives an individual the freedom to determine how to accomplish the task or activity, and (d) involves a higher level of responsibility and visibility. Although most

research on the consequences of job challenge has focused on managerial jobs, research has indicated that its ingredients are applicable to non-managerial jobs as well (De Pater et al. 2010; Preenen et al. 2015).

The extent to which individuals have challenging experiences during their pre-occupational years and early careers promotes their future career development and success. Watson (2001), for example, showed that pre-occupational experiences in social and educational settings, such as activities at school, in sports, and as a club member, affect later careers progress. Studies by Berlew and Hall (1966) and Bray et al. (1974) showed that employees who engaged in challenging job assignments early in their careers were –compared to those who engaged in less challenging assignments– more successful after several years in their careers.

Several reasons have been proposed for why challenging experiences are important for career development. First, challenging experiences provide *opportunities for learning* a wide range of skills, abilities, and insights that enable people to function effectively and motivates them to do so (McCall et al. 1988; McCauley et al. 1994). Secondly, they affect people's *interests*, *job attitudes,* and their *competency perceptions*. People's early experiences direct their activity preferences in future jobs and their choices for specific jobs or training (Mitchell and Krumboltz 1990), and thus affect and endorse career relevant behaviours. Also, employees who have to meet high performance expectations in the first years of their career are likely to internalise high work standards, which facilitate performance and success in their later years (Berlew and Hall 1966). Moreover, challenging job experiences increase one's self-efficacy (Aryee and Chu 2012; Seibert et al. 2017) and the willingness to "launch out into the unknown again" (Davies and Easterby-Smith 1984, p. 176). That is, it is likely that successful performance of a challenging task will increase people's self-efficacy beliefs regarding the accomplishment of other challenging tasks, which in turn may encourage them to seek out additional challenging experiences (Maurer and Tarulli 1994) and boost their ambition for other challenging jobs (Van Vianen 1999).

The third reason why challenging assignments are thought to be important for career development is related to opportunities to increase one's *organisational power*, such as visibility to others and the building of effective interpersonal networks within and outside the organisation. Both visibility and networking are considered important for career advancement (Hurley and Sonnenfeld 1998). Finally, challenging experiences serve as a *cue for individuals' promotability*. Information with regard to the type of tasks employees perform is used as a cue to determine employees' abilities and career potential (e.g., De Pater et al. 2009a; Seibert et al. 2017), which are important determinants of promotion decisions.

Employees differ in the extent to which they experience challenge in their job. The next paragraphs address possible reasons for these differences. Are challenging experiences the result of personal or organisational initiatives?

Challenging Experiences: Self-Initiated

Whether employees encounter challenge in their job may depend on their personal initiatives. As noted above, two people that occupy a similar job often differ in the specific activities they employ in their job. Take two persons who both occupy a position as math teacher at the same school at a similar job level. One of them spends most of the working hours on developing new teaching programs whereas the other is mainly concerned with coaching students. What both teachers have in common is that for years they have specialized in their specific tasks. In their school, they are acknowledged as the "developer" and "the coach", respectively. However, both teachers may feel that their job no longer challenges them. The first teacher may take the initiative to withdraw from the current tasks and to explore other, more challenging, ones. The second teacher may continue with working on the same tasks as before. Whether people initiate challenging experiences may depend on personal motives, self-efficacy, proactive personality, or a combination of these personal factors.

Motives

Employees' motives drive their work behaviours. In this section we address important motivational concepts that seem relevant for employee engagement in challenging tasks: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, mastery and performance orientations, approach and avoidance motives, and achievement goal orientations.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation It has been proposed that challenge is an important aspect of intrinsic motivation and that intrinsically motivated individuals strive to select work assignments that allow them to develop new skills and to be autonomous (Amabile et al. 1994). This is in line with extant theory and research that describes intrinsic motivation as including self-determination (i.e., preference for choice and autonomy; Deci and Ryan 1985), competence (i.e., mastery orientation and preference for challenge; Deci and Ryan 1985), task involvement (Csikszentmihalyi 1975), and curiosity and interest (Reeve et al. 1986). The extent to which people are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated has generally been conceived of as a stable trait. Amabile et al. (1994), for example, demonstrated that people's motivations remained stable for longer periods and across major life transitions. This finding may suggest that people who are intrinsically motivated will initiate tasks and assignments that are challenging, whereas extrinsically motivated people will be less focused on performing these types of tasks. In a study on job flexibility of career starters (Peiró et al. 2002), it was indeed found that adolescents who rated high on intrinsic work values showed less resistance to accept a challenging job than those who rated low on intrinsic work values.

Mastery and Performance Orientations Literatures on learning and development in educational and work settings have emphasised the role of people's goal orientations in relation to preferences for and acceptance of challenging tasks and assignments. Goal orientation theory (Dweck 1986) conceptualises the broader goals that people adopt and pursue in achievement situations as a personality dimension and distinguishes mastery and performance orientations. Mastery-oriented individuals focus on the development of competence through mastering challenging tasks and activities, whereas performance-oriented individuals focus on demonstrating and validating their competence and avoiding failure (e.g., Elliot 1999; VandeWalle et al. 2001). Hence, people with a mastery orientation will be more likely to pursue challenging tasks because they aim to learn and master new skills. In contrast, people with a performance orientation may be less likely to engage in challenging tasks because they tend to minimise the risk of being viewed as incompetent by others. Instead, they may be more likely to engage in less challenging tasks that they know they can perform well, so that they can show their superior performance on these tasks to others. Only sparse research focused on the relationship between people's goal orientation and (consequences of) job challenge, and most of these studies only included learning orientations. For instance, a study by Dragoni et al. (2009) showed that early-career managers with stronger learning orientations were indeed more likely to engage in challenging assignments than those with weaker learning orientations. These authors also hypothesised that people who hold a strong learning goal orientation would learn more from engaging in challenging work experiences than those holding a weaker learning goal orientation, because they respond to challenging situations more constructively. The results of their study indeed showed that the relationship between engagement in challenging assignments and managerial competencies was stronger for managers with strong learning orientations than for those with weaker learning orientations.

Approach and Avoidance Motives Other researchers have emphasised the approach – avoidance dichotomy as a framework for understanding people's motivation in achievement contexts. These researchers assume that when people are in an achievement situation, they expect to be compared with some standard of excellence and will either be inclined to demonstrate high ability (approach motives) or to avoid demonstrating low ability (avoidance motives) (e.g., Cooper 1983). Approach motives reflect people's aims to achieve challenging performance standards (Hirschfeld et al. 2006) and their inclination to attain success (Elliot 1999). Avoidance motives reflect people's desire to avoid failure and to prevent negative evaluations of one's competence (Hirschfeld et al. 2006) and the tendency to disengage from achievement situations (Elliot 1999). Based on these theoretical notions, De Pater et al. (2009b) proposed that people who have strong approach motives would be more willing to engage in challenging tasks than those with weaker approach motives and that people who have strong avoidance motives will be less likely to engage in challenging tasks than those who have weaker avoidance motives. They tested these assumptions in a study among university students. In this study, students participated in an assessment centre. They were told that their management

potential would be established based on their task performance and they were encouraged to show their capacities as best as they could. The assessment centre consisted of ten tasks: three challenging tasks and seven non-challenging tasks (a pre-test among another student sample confirmed that the challenging tasks were indeed more challenging than the non-challenging tasks). During the assessment centre, participants could freely choose three of the ten tasks they wanted to perform. Although all of them realised that the challenging tasks were most informative for establishing their management potential (as measured after the assessment centre), students differed considerably in the number of challenging tasks they chose to perform. The most important predictors of the number of challenging tasks students chose to perform were their approach and avoidance motives. Students' approach motives related positively and their avoidance motives related negatively to choosing challenging tasks.

Achievement Goal Orientations Elliot (1999) combined the mastery orientation – performance orientation dichotomy and the approach motives – avoidance motives dichotomy into a 2×2 achievement goal model comprising of four motivational orientations. People with a performance-approach goal orientation are motivated to gain favourable judgements from others by demonstrating superior performance and abilities relative to others. People with a performance-avoidance orientation aim to prevent receiving negative judgements from others by avoiding demonstrating incompetence as compared to others. People with a mastery-approach orientation focus on the development of competence through mastering challenging tasks and activities, whereas those with a mastery-avoidance orientation aim to avoid skill deterioration, the loss of skill, or leaving tasks unmastered.

Because people's goal orientations affect the difficulty of the goals they set for themselves (e.g., Jagacinski et al. 2008), it is likely that they affect people's choices for performing challenging tasks. A study by Preenen et al. (2014b) showed that especially employees with a strong mastery approach goal orientation engaged in challenging tasks. Mastery avoidance, performance approach, and performance avoidance goal orientations did not affect the extent to which they engaged in challenging work.

Self-Efficacy

Pursuing challenging tasks may also depend on individuals' self-efficacy regarding these types of tasks. Self-efficacy refers to the confidence that a person has regarding his or her capabilities to successfully perform a specific task within a specific context (Bandura 1986). Challenging tasks may cover a broad range of tasks that are beyond individuals' usual tasks. Here individuals may need role breadth rather than task-specific self-efficacy. That is, they need confidence in their ability to carry out a broader set of tasks and roles that are beyond their job description (Parker 1998,

p. 835). Similar to task specific self-efficacy, people's role breadth self-efficacy is not necessarily fixed but can be modified through frequent exposure to challenging tasks and enactive mastery (repeated performance success), vicarious experience (modelling), verbal persuasion, and physiological states and reactions (Bandura 1986).

Individuals need to have enough opportunities for enactive mastery by means of performing varied and challenging tasks that will, in turn, increase their competence beliefs. Moreover, "having a sustained opportunity to adapt to high demands can promote the development of resources to aid in self-regulation" (Parker 2014, p. 675). Observing similar others succeed or fail at a particular activity (vicarious experience) may also affect one's competence beliefs, especially if one has had little direct experience upon which to estimate personal competence. People's role-breath self-efficacy may be enhanced if they see others effectively dealing with broader and more challenging tasks.

Social support through verbal persuasion may also strengthen employees' beliefs in their competence to perform challenging tasks, especially when this support is provided by their supervisor (e.g., Parker 1998). According to Bandura (1986), social persuasion can contribute to self-efficacy, but social persuasion alone may be limited in its power. Finally, individuals' physiological state when performing a task may also affect their confidence in performing these tasks. Engagement in challenging tasks often evokes higher levels of arousal and physiological reactions (e.g., Tomaka et al. 1997) and performing challenging tasks may create both positive and negative feelings (Dong et al. 2014). Individuals may, for example, value the opportunity to learn and grow, and may find the novel tasks interesting, which will elicit feelings of excitement, enthusiasm, and enjoyment. However, they may also perceive their challenging task as risky and enhancing the possibility of performance failure, which will elicit feelings of anxiety and fear.

Because negative feelings during the performance of challenging tasks undermine an individual's confidence, Dong et al. (2014) examined whether personal characteristics could buffer the negative feelings. They reasoned that individuals high on emotional intelligence (i.e., a high ability to identify emotions, to understand the relationships among emotions, to use emotions to direct cognitions, and to regulate one's emotions and those of others; Goleman 1995) will be more aware of unpleasant feelings that stem from challenging experiences and will be better able to anticipate unpleasant feelings and to cope with them (such as reappraising the challenging experiences) than individuals low on emotional intelligence. Although this proposition was not supported, the results of this study showed that emotional intelligence did reduce the negative cognitions (turnover intentions) associated with unpleasant feelings. Apparently, individuals high on emotional intelligence accept that stressful feelings are a natural part of challenging experiences whereas individuals low on emotional intelligence perceive them as a reason to quit their job.

Given that emotional intelligence is a relatively stable personality trait, it may be difficult to improve people's ability to actively buffer their negative feelings to protect or enhance self-efficacy while performing challenging tasks. An alternative and maybe even more effective approach may be to enhance people's *positive* feelings

to enhance self-esteem while they perform challenging tasks. It is likely that people who have positive experiences while working on challenging assignments are more likely to pursue further challenging tasks in the future. Positive feelings to work tasks can be induced by adopting the right types of goals in achievement situations (Dweck 1986).

In this light, Preenen et al. (2014a) examined the impact of individuals' goal orientations on their positive and negative activating mood while working on a high or low-challenging assignment. Participants in this study were randomly assigned to perform either a challenging or a non-challenging task and were randomly given instructions that elicit a mastery-approach or a performance-approach orientation. Although goal orientations have often been conceptualized as a relatively stable individual difference variable, they can be (temporarily) influenced (e.g., Barron and Harackiewicz 2001). It was found that conducting a challenging assignment with an induced focus on learning elicited a higher positive activating mood than performing a challenging assignment with an induced focus on outperforming others, or no induced goal orientation. No effects were found for negative activating mood. These findings suggest that high-challenging assignments are best introduced with an instruction that focuses an employee on learning. A learning orientation enhances positive feelings during task performance, which promote employees' self-efficacy and future engagement in challenging tasks.

Proactive Personality

Unlike role breadth self-efficacy, which changes over time due to – among others – the changing job experiences people engage in (Parker 1998), proactive personality is conceptualized as a relatively stable personal disposition "to take personal initiative in a broad range of activities and situations" (Seibert et al. 2001, p. 847). A proactive individual can be described as "one who is relatively unconstrained by situational forces, and who effects environmental change" (Bateman and Crant 1993, p. 105) through engagement in proactive behaviours. As opposed to their less proactive counterparts, who are more likely to "adapt to and endure current circumstances" (Fuller and Marler 2009, p. 330), proactive individuals tend to take initiative to improve their current situation or to create new situations that are beneficial to them (Crant 2000).

At work, proactive individuals feel responsible for initiating constructive change (Fuller et al. 2006) and tend to make changes to their work situation in order to improve their opportunities for personal success (Li et al. 2010). Empirical research has underlined the importance of proactive personality in the work domain and meta-analytic studies have shown that it positively relates to favourable job attitudes, work behaviours, and career success (Fuller and Marler 2009; Ng et al. 2005; Spitzmuller et al. 2015; Thomas et al. 2010; Tornau and Frese 2013).

It is likely that proactive employees, who "select, create, and influence situations in which they work" (Seibert et al. 1999, p. 417) choose to engage in more

challenging tasks and activities than their less proactive colleagues, because engagement in challenging tasks will improve their chances on promotion and success.

From an individual perspective, research has indicated that proactive employees are more likely to initiate and engage in career management activities and are more likely to identify, explore, and pursue opportunities for self-improvement and skill development (Jiang 2017; Seibert et al. 2001). Moreover, they have a learning goal orientation, take more initiative to further their career, and tend to see challenging work situations as an opportunity rather than as a threat (Fuller and Marler 2009). From a relational perspective, proactive employees have been found to develop better relationships with their supervisor (leader-member exchange relationships; Fuller and Marler 2009) and to be more likely to engage in networking (Thompson 2005), which increases their opportunities to identify opportunities to engage in challenging tasks and activities. At the same time, proactive employees engage in more voice behaviours (Tornau and Frese 2013), which may involve requests to receive more challenging work from those around them. De Pater et al. (2009b) examined the early work experiences of bachelor students during their internship at different companies in The Netherlands and found that interns' proactivity ratings as measured with the *Proactive Personality Scale* (see Seibert et al. 1999) were indeed positively related to having challenging experiences. Proactive interns reported to have more of these experiences during their internship.

Proactive personality may not only affect the *extent* to which employees engage in challenging tasks and activities, but may also affect *how* they deal with the challenges they encounter, which may, in turn, affect the outcomes or consequences of performing challenging tasks. First, proactive individuals tend to be more motivated and energetic than individuals low on proactive personality (Truxillo et al. 2012) and will persist until they reach their objectives (Crant 2000). Moreover, as they have broader networks (Thompson 2005) and better social exchange relationships with others in their organization (Li et al. 2010), it is likely that they have more social support and access to information (Jiang 2017) that may help them in completing their challenging tasks and activities. Successful completion of challenging work may, in turn, boost their role breath self-efficacy and their interest in pursuing challenging tasks.

Altogether, research has shown that intrinsically motivated individuals who have a mastery-approach orientation, and who are self-efficacious and pro-active are more likely to be involved in challenging tasks than individuals who are extrinsically motivated, performance-oriented, low on self-efficacy, and less pro-active. Moreover, several studies have evidenced that individuals' motivation, goal-orientation, self-efficacy, and pro-active personality are interrelated. Of course, people's specific work experiences are not only determined by their own motives and personality, but also by factors in the work environment. Organisational practices and supervisor behaviours may largely determine employees' exposure to challenging job experiences.

Challenging Experiences: Assigned

In many work settings, individuals are not entirely free to choose which activities to engage in, and, thus, what experiences they have. Moreover, as assignments at work are often organised in groups, tasks are allocated among group members. Whether or not individuals have challenging experiences will, to a certain extent, depend on the behaviours of peers and supervisors. Thus, despite the important role of individuals' own characteristics in pursuing specific activities as mentioned above, their role breadth self-efficacy and opportunities for its enhancement are at least partly affected by the behaviours of others.

The role that peers may play in task choice decisions has been demonstrated in a study that examined the division of tasks among men and women (De Pater et al. 2009c). In this unique laboratory study, the researchers created an achievement situation in which challenging tasks were scarce (as they often are). The researchers first asked male and female students to choose three (out of six) tasks they would want to perform in an assessment centre advertised to investigate their management potential. Three of the tasks were challenging, the other three tasks were non-challenging. There were no gender differences in task choice; that is, male and female students chose to perform a similar amount of challenging and non-challenging tasks. Thereafter, researchers created mixed-gender dyads with males and females having similar task choices and students (in dyads) participated in the assessment centre. Each dyad was asked to perform six tasks (the three challenging tasks and three non-challenging tasks they earlier had chosen from) and they were informed that both members of a dyad were not allowed to perform the same tasks. Therefore, they were asked to allocate the tasks among each other (each student was asked to perform three of the six tasks) before starting to work on the tasks. The results of this study showed that male and female participants did not differ in the total number of initially chosen tasks they maintained during the task allocation. However, they did differ in the number of *challenging* tasks maintained after the task allocation. From the original set of challenging and non-challenging tasks they had chosen, males stuck to their initially chosen challenging tasks during task allocation whereas female participants more often held their initially chosen non-challenging tasks. Thus, after task allocation, females had *fewer* challenging tasks than males had, although they had similar preferences for these types of tasks. Female participants may have shifted their task preferences in the direction of more non-challenging tasks under the influence of gender stereotypes; that is, the belief that responsibility for challenging tasks is more appropriate for men than for women.

Recent research from Babcock et al. (2017), including a series of field and experimental studies, supports the contention that women, more than men, are inclined to perform the less advantageous tasks (i.e., tasks that lower their chance on promotion). Furthermore, they found that this outcome was not caused by sex differences in task preferences, but was associated with the sex composition of the group and the prevailing belief that women are more likely than men to perform these tasks. That is, individuals in mixed-sex groups expect that women will respond more

favourably to requests to undertake less advantageous tasks than do men and, indeed, this study found that women responded as expected. Hence, women are more likely than men to be invited to perform less advantageous tasks and to accept these invitations in mixed-sex groups.

These studies clearly show that employees' opportunities for performing challenging tasks depend on the specific characteristics of the group and the process of task allocation among them. If employees stay in their work group for a substantial amount of time, "standardised" processes of task allocation may easily arise with some group members being repeatedly deprived from challenging experiences whereas few others become showered with these experiences.

Supervisors, even more so than peers, influence the types of task experiences of their employees. For instance, through delegation of some of their tasks to subordinates they may stimulate the development of subordinates' skills, knowledge, and even careers (Vinton 1987; Yukl and Fu 1999). Delegation may concern both challenging and routine tasks, but most supervisors will be particularly careful in delegating challenging tasks. Delegating challenging assignments to subordinates involves a certain risk for the supervisor (Van de Vliert and Smith 2004). They will try to reduce that risk by delegating assignments exclusively to those subordinates they trust to be both willing (Hersey and Blanchard 1993) and able (e.g., Leana 1986) to perform well. Bauer and Green (1996) indeed found that supervisors' delegation behaviours were positively related to the job performance ratings of their subordinates. Also, other factors may play a role in supervisors' delegation behaviours, such as supervisors' impression of subordinates' ambition. Ambitious subordinates may impress their supervisor as being eager to perform challenging assignments in order to improve their promotability. At least the risk of task failure due to subordinates' lower effort might be reduced if the subordinate is ambitious. Moreover, research has shown that supervisors evaluate the contextual performance of ambitious subordinates higher than those of non-ambitious ones (Hogan et al. 1998).

Some studies investigated whether and how supervisors assign challenging tasks to subordinates. For example, De Pater et al. (2010) examined possible gender differences in challenging job experiences and whether these differences could be due to supervisors' task assignment behaviours. They found that female employees had fewer challenging experiences in their jobs than male employees, irrespective of their ambition. Furthermore, they showed that supervisors' task allocation decisions were not gender-blind as supervisors were inclined to assign challenging tasks to their male rather than female subordinates, regardless of subordinates' ambition and job performance.

Whether supervisors are inclined to allocate challenging tasks to subordinates seems to depend on supervisors' achievement motivation and supervisory task authority (i.e., the extent to which supervisors decide on the types of tasks that their employees perform; Preenen et al. 2014b). Supervisors who decide on employees' work and allocate tasks to them, tend to allocate non-challenging rather than challenging tasks. This seems especially true for supervisors who have a strong performance-approach orientation. These supervisors have a high need for

achievement and wish to excel and may therefore prefer to retain important tasks rather than allocate them to their employees. These findings show that employees who would want to undertake challenging activities may be hampered by the task allocation behaviours of their supervisor.

Supervisors may not realise the far-reaching consequences of their daily task allocation behaviours for the careers of their employees. This awareness can be raised by regular employee-supervisor job conversations in which both parties are encouraged to explore options for employee development. Employee-supervisor job conversations tend to be held in the form of performance appraisal interviews that are focused on employees' performance, progress, aims, and needs at work (Linna et al. 2012). Although these interviews also aim to facilitate the formation of personal development plans, relatively few interviews seem to include development-oriented topics (Linna et al. 2012). A study from Dalhoeven et al. (2014), for example, showed that employees' development opportunities were less often discussed in job conversations with older as compared to younger employees. Consequently, older employees reported less developmental support from their supervisor, which in turn was related to their lower interest in development and learning. These findings were confirmed in a follow-up longitudinal study among employees from a governmental organisation (Dalhoeven et al. 2016). This study showed that developmental support from the supervisor promoted discussing topics related to learning and development during the annual job conversation, which fostered employee training and development willingness. In addition, it was found that employees who underwent a change in their work experienced more learning and were subsequently more willing to pursue developmental activities at work. These results were found not only among younger employees but also among older ones.

All in all, the task allocation behaviours of peers and supervisors in particular significantly influence employees' opportunities for development and learning, and thus their employability.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that careers involve a nonlinear sequence of different and unpredictable work activities and roles. Therefore, employees' career success will highly depend on their employability (the ability to gain and retain employment) and the capacity to adapt to and foresee career transitions. Furthermore, we have highlighted that building human capital through job-related training, which is traditionally conceived of as a predictor of career success, is insufficient for keeping pace with the changing job market. Instead, for remaining employable employees should enlarge the quality of their work experiences; that is, the richness, variety and breadth of their tasks and responsibilities. The core element of these work experiences is that they challenge employees to develop new skills that are applicable in a broad range of work activities and roles. In addition, challenging work experiences stimulate work motivation, increase role-breadth self-efficacy, and raise

interest in future learning, particularly when employees repeatedly engage in these types of experiences.

Employees differ in the extent to which they initiate their involvement in challenging tasks. Prior research has shown that employees who are intrinsically motivated, focus on the development of their competencies (i.e., who are mastery-approach oriented), are self-efficacious, and take personal initiative in a broad range of situations will voluntarily engage in challenging tasks. In turbulent economic and labour market conditions, these employees will be more successful than their extrinsically motivated, performance-oriented, unconfident, and inactive counterparts. The latter, more vulnerable, employees need the support and encouragement from the organizational environment for remaining employable.

Organisations, and supervisors in particular, could promote the challenging experiences of employees in several ways. First, supervisors could persuade employees to undertake non-routine tasks and they could do so by stressing development and learning rather than performance goals. Inducing a learning orientation in employees will promote positive feelings toward challenging tasks and employees' trust that these tasks can be accomplished. This requires a culture of tolerance in which employees are allowed to fail on their challenging experiences and – if necessary – can engage in other challenges that fit them better. Second, supervisors could delegate tasks to employees while taking care to assign these tasks to all (rather than only some) employees on a regular base. Moreover, when it comes to the spontaneous division of tasks within a team, supervisors could monitor whether challenging tasks are divided equally among the team members as to prevent that only some rather than all employees perform the advantageous tasks.

Third, supervisors could explicitly address the performance of challenging tasks in the (annual) job interview they have with their employees. Organisations could, for example, promote the making of idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) during (annual) job interviews. Idiosyncratic deals are special arrangements that employees negotiate with their employers (Rousseau 2005). These special arrangements aim to meet the needs and preferences of both employee and employer (Hornung et al. 2008). Although the arrangements can vary in content (e.g., pay, flexible work hours, development, tasks) and scope (a single work element or multiple elements), they tend to particularly involve skill and career development (developmental i-deals). By including developmental i-deal making as a compulsory subject of job interviews and holding supervisors accountable for making developmental i-deals with their employees, organisations could design jobs that are both challenging and attainable for individual employees.

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