



## Meaning and determinants of career success: A Malaysian perspective<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This exploratory, qualitative study sought to unearth and explore meanings of career success and perceived influences on career success among working adults in Malaysia. Eighteen people in nursing, blue-collar, and business occupations were interviewed. Three objective and five subjective meanings of career success and six perceived internal factors (primarily individual traits) and three external factors emerged from the data. The research suggests that people in the early stage of their career are more instrumentally driven in defining career success, whereas people in the late stage of their career target a greater variety of career features and outcomes. Also, the research suggests Malaysian working adults should not be stereotyped as being satisfied with collective outcomes as many also target individual achievements.

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### El significado del éxito en la carrera profesional y sus determinantes: la perspectiva malaya

#### RESUMEN

Este estudio exploratorio cualitativo busca descubrir y explorar los significados del éxito en la carrera profesional y las influencias que aprecian en el mismo los trabajadores adultos malayos. Se entrevistó a 18 personas de las profesiones de enfermería, obreros y del mundo empresarial. De los datos surgieron tres significados objetivos y cinco subjetivos acerca del éxito en la carrera profesional y se apreciaron seis factores internos (sobre todo rasgos individuales) y tres externos. La investigación indica que cuando se encuentran en las primeras fases de su carrera profesional, a las personas las mueve un mayor afán instrumental al definir el éxito profesional, mientras que en fases más avanzadas de su carrera profesional se centran en una mayor variedad de características y resultados de la misma. Igualmente la investigación apunta que los trabajadores adultos no deberían estereotiparse en el sentido de contentarse con los resultados colectivos, dado que muchos se centran también en logros individuales.

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In recent years, career success has become the focus of an increasing number of career scholars in their theoretical and empirical works (e.g., Lawrence, 2011; Lirio et al., 2007). Although the study of career success has progressed significantly, the majority of career success research has been conducted in Western countries (predominantly in the USA) and using quantitative methodology leading to calls for more research on this topic in more diverse career contexts (both within and across cultures) and using qualitative approaches (cf. Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Heslin, 2005). Responding to these calls, we attempt to expand this line of research by examining career success in a non-Western context using qualitative methodology.

To date, little is known about how Malaysians conceptualize careers. In particular, a study on how working Malaysians in different occupations and career stages conceptualize career success has yet to be found in the management literature. Past studies on career success in Malaysia have been mostly on women and academics (e.g., Arokiasamy, Ismail, Ahmad, & Othman, 2011; Ismail & Ibrahim, 2007; Ismail & Rasdi, 2006) or used quantitative surveys to predict career success (e.g., Rasdi, Ismail, & Garavan, 2011). Accordingly, to address this gap, the purpose of this exploratory study was to gain an understanding of how people from different occupational and career stage groups in Malaysia conceptualize career success. Additionally, for a more complete understanding, we sought to identify what these groups saw as factors that influence career success. Although career perceptions and experiences are individual in nature, we believe that some commonalities would emerge from the study evidence. Specifically, we attempted to answer the following research questions:

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1. How do working adults in Malaysia define career success and what do they believe to be the main determinants of career success?
2. Are there key differences in how people from different occupational groups view career success and its determinants?
3. Are there key differences in how people at different career stages view career success and its determinants? Specifically, do people in the early stage of their career view career success differently from those in the late stage of their career?

Answers to the above questions will add to the understanding of how people in different career contexts view career success. In addition, they will help both individuals and organizations develop better strategies in managing careers. Organizations in Malaysia, in particular, need to understand how their employees at various levels and stages view their career success before they can provide an employment environment conducive for meeting employees' career expectations.

## Background Literature

**Meaning of career success.** A career is an evolving sequence of a person's work-related experiences over time (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989, p. 8), and one does not need to have a professional job, occupational stability, or upward mobility to have a career (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000; Hall, 2002). The desired outcomes or accumulated achievements (real or perceived) that result from these work-related experiences constitute career success (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). According to career researchers, these positive outcomes can be extrinsic (objective career success), such as hierarchical position or salary, or intrinsic (subjective career success), such as personal feelings of career accomplishment (Hennequin, 2007; Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Nicholson & de Waal-Andrews, 2005).

The general view is that objective career success and subjective career success are related, although there is still debate as to the direction of the relationship (cf. Hall & Chandler, 2005; Nicholson & de Waal-Andrews, 2005). Although related, these two constructs are conceptually different, and people who have achieved success in the objective sense may not actually feel successful or proud of their achievements (Korman, Wittig-Berman, & Lang, 1981). These constructs have also been found to be empirically distinct with different predictors (see Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005 for a meta-analytic review). For example, one study found educational achievement to predict objective career success but not subjective career success and work centrality to predict subjective career success but not objective career success (e.g., Nabi, 1999). Therefore, for a more complete understanding of the concept, both objective and subjective career success need to be included in models of career success.

Past researchers have identified several criteria for assessing objective and subjective career success. Traditionally, salary progression and job promotion were the objective criteria researchers commonly adopted in their work on career success. Heslin (2005), however, has argued that these traditional criteria are both contaminated and deficient. For example, the traditional criteria of hierarchical advancement may have limited relevance for people in occupations that offer little opportunities for upward progression (Hennequin, 2007) or for older employees who have already achieved success (Sturges, 1999).

Also, with the subjective criteria of career success, there is a need to consider career context and include a broader range of criteria (e.g., learning and work-life balance) that goes beyond job satisfaction and career satisfaction in future studies (Arthur et al., 2005; Heslin, 2005). This is particular true given that changes in the career environment (e.g., changes in psychological contracts, technology, and organizational structure) have made contemporary careers increasingly boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), protean (Hall, 1996), and kaleidoscopic (Sullivan & Maneiro, 2008).

**Determinants of career success.** Few would dispute the importance of the individual in contributing to career success, and much research has been done to demonstrate the effects of individual differences in predicting career success. Individual difference factors that have been found to predict career success include demographic background (e.g., Gattiker & Larwood, 1988), cognitive ability (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2010), dispositional traits (see Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2007 for a review), human capital (e.g., Judge, Klinger, & Simon, 2010), social capital (e.g., Grimland, Vigoda-Gadot, & Baruch, 2012), motivation (e.g., Traavik & Richardsen, 2010), career commitment (Poon, 2004), proactive behavior (e.g., Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999), political influence behaviors (e.g., Judge & Bretz, 1994), and networking behaviors (e.g., Wolff & Moser, 2009).

Although much of the work has focused on individual-level determinants of career success, situational determinants have also been shown to predict career success. For example, there is evidence that (a) supervisor-subordinate relationship predicts salary progression, promotability, and career satisfaction (e.g., Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999), (b) career mentoring predicts promotion rate and total compensation (e.g., Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991), and (c) employer support for development contributed to career success (e.g., Maurer & Chapman, 2013). The non-work context (e.g., family support, societal constraints) may also play a role in influencing career success (e.g., Juntunen et al., 2001; Lirio et al., 2007). For example, macroeconomic conditions (e.g., economic expansion) and public policies (e.g., affirmative action programs) can generate opportunities for greater career mobility and success (Feldman & Ng, 2007).

In Judge et al.'s (1995) model of career success, variables hypothesized to predict career success were grouped into one organizational/industry-level category (e.g., organizational size) and three individual-level categories: demographics (e.g., age), human capital (e.g., education), and motivational (e.g., ambition). More recently, Ng et al. (2005) in their meta-analytic review of the predictors of career success classified such predictors into four categories: socio-demographic status (e.g., gender), human capital (e.g., social capital), stable individual differences (e.g., personality), and organizational sponsorship (e.g., training opportunities).

Tu, Forret, and Sullivan (2006) surveyed Chinese managers in China to assess whether or not demographic, human capital, motivational, and organizational characteristics variables found to be predictive of career success in the West were also predictive of career success of Chinese professionals. These researchers concluded that Western models of career success cannot be unilaterally applied in non-Western contexts and called on researchers to pay more attention to cultural contexts when researching career issues across national borders.

Within the Malaysian context, although not much is known about what Malaysian employees saw to be the determinants of career success, there is some limited evidence that both individual and situational factors are at play. For example, Ismail, Rasdi, and Wahat (2005) interviewed 31 female college professors and found this group of employees to attribute their career success to factors such as education, career centrality (e.g., career focus), health consciousness, religiosity, and institutional support (e.g., sabbatical leave). More recently, Rasdi et al. (2011), in a quantitative survey of 288 Malaysian managers, found demographic and human capital factors to predict objective career success and demographic, individual, and structural factors to predict subjective career success.

## Method

### Study Participants

This exploratory study, conducted in Malaysia, was part of an initial phase of a global research initiative aimed at studying contemporary careers across various cultures (see Briscoe, Hall, & Mayrhofer,

2011). We identified and gained access to research participants based on personal contacts and referrals from friends and associates. In generating new theory and conceptual frameworks (such as a new understanding of career success for Malaysia) qualitative methods such as interviewing are recommended (Patton, 1990). McGrath (1981) suggests such methods are needed for flexible generation of testable categories before quantitative research is appropriate. A further suggestion for generating new categories is to ensure the samples used differ in important ways (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In order to sample strategically, we targeted male and female working adults from three occupational categories (i.e., businesspeople, nurses, and blue-collar workers) at different career stages (early vs. late) from the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia (i.e., Malays, Chinese, and Indians). These groups were chosen because some had more structured careers (nurses), some had less professional training and less professional networks for defining and achieving career success (blue-collar), and finally, some relied upon dynamic and professional networks both to define and to achieve career success (business people). For each of these occupational groups, we interviewed three people who were in the early stage (< 30 years old) and three people who were in the late stage ( $\geq 50$  years old) of their career. In total, 18 Malaysian working adults (10 men, 8 women) participated in the study. Codenames used to identify the study participants are given and explained in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the study participants (10 married, 8 single) were aged between 20 and 61. The average age of the 9 participants who were in the early stage of their career was 26, whereas the average age of the 9 participants who were in the later stage

of their career was 54. About 56% of the participants were Malays, 33% were Chinese, and 11% were Indians, a close approximation to the ethnic composition of the population of the country.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Our objective was to explore and better understand the meaning of career success and other career success-related issues by having Malaysians express their views on these issues in their own words. Therefore, we used a qualitative design. After obtaining informed consent, three of the researchers conducted qualitative, semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Except for one person who preferred not to be audio taped, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Four interviews were conducted in the Malay language; all others used the English language (which is broadly used in Malaysia).

To enable us to compare participant responses across each topic, we used a consistent set of questions to elicit participants' accounts of their career from school-leaving to present day. We began an interview by asking participants for some demographic information and requesting them to indicate the major milestones and transitions in their work history by completing a timeline on a piece of paper. We then had participants briefly describe this timeline before we asked a series of questions that addressed our research question such as "Looking back at your experience and your career thus far, what does career success mean for you?" and "Considering your career, what do you see as the crucial factors for career success?" Other questions to clarify, probe, and expand on the initial responses to these predetermined questions were posed as needed.

**Table 1**  
Demographic Characteristics of Sample

	Participant Codename	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Ethnic Group	Education	Current Job Designation
<b>Businesspeople</b>							
1	BU-E1	29	Male	Married	Malay	BBA	Businessman (Self-employed)
2	BU-E2	26	Male	Single	Indian	BBA	Financial planner
3	BU-E3	29	Female	Single	Malay	MBA	Compensation analyst
4	BU-L1	50	Male	Married	Malay	MBA	CEO
5	BU-L2	58	Male	Married	Chinese	MEcon	Executive director (Self-employed)
6	BU-L3	61	Female	Single	Chinese	MBA	Managing director (Self-employed)
<b>Nurses</b>							
1	NU-E1	24	Female	Married	Malay	Nursing diploma	Staff nurse
2	NU-E2	25	Female	Single	Malay	Nursing diploma	Staff nurse
3	NU-E3	26	Female	Single	Chinese	Nursing diploma	Staff nurse
4	NU-L1	50	Female	Married	Malay	Nursing degree	Nurse educator
5	NU-L2	50s	Female	Married	Malay	Nursing degree	Clinical specialist
6	NU-L3	52	Female	Married	Chinese	Nursing degree	Nurse educator
<b>Blue-collar Workers</b>							
1	BC-E1	20	Male	Single	Malay	Secondary school	Factory operator
2	BC-E2	25	Male	Single	Chinese	Secondary school	Driver cum Salesman
3	BC-E3	29	Male	Single	Malay	Secondary school	Security guard
4	BC-L1	52	Male	Married	Chinese	Secondary school	Estate field conductor
5	BC-L2	53	Male	Married	Indian	Secondary school	Store coordinator
6	BC-L3	59	Male	Married	Malay	Secondary school	Security guard

Note. Participant codenames used to identify specific individuals indicate whether a participant was in a business (BU), nursing (NU), or blue-collar (BC) career and in the early stage (E) or late stage (L) of their career.

Data analysis was inductive, and the constant comparative method was used. This involved progressively extending and refining categories and concepts, and matrix analysis to identify focal themes and patterns in the data (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which eventually allowed for the creation of conceptual categories. Specifically, the researchers analyzed the interview transcripts by (a) identifying, extracting, and paraphrasing relevant and meaningful statements; (b) generalizing, reducing, clustering, and integrating paraphrases to form preliminary categories; (c) describing and modifying categories as new data were analyzed; (d) allocating codes to the categories and developing a master list of codes; (e) recoding the interview data manually (i.e., reading each transcript again and attributing a code to text passages by writing the code next to the related passage); and (f) creating a number of matrices at the individual and group level and filling in the cells of the matrices with data based on the coded categories.

The text passages related to the meanings of career success and its perceived influences in this study were coded by one of the researchers and recoded by a doctoral candidate who was a research assistant to the researcher. The overall agreement rate between the two coders was 69% (64% for the business group, 68% for the nurses group, and 82% for the blue-collar group). The agreement between coders was not high probably because (a) as is the case in qualitative research using semi-structured interviews, interview responses are open to different interpretations, (b) the second coder was less knowledgeable about the interview subject matter than the first coder, and (c) the coding scheme comprising both primary and several secondary codes was complex. We resolved disagreements through discussion and debate. For the final analyses, categories that had fewer than three cases were excluded.

## Results

We present our results, using general descriptions and direct quotes, in two parts. First, we report what career success means to the participants as an intact group followed by a comparison of their responses by occupational and career stage groupings. Next, we report the results regarding the factors that are perceived to influence career success for the overall sample, followed again by a comparison of the responses by occupational grouping and career stage grouping. We highlight group differences for each category only in cases in which there is a differential of at least three people and the percentage of participants in a group who mentioned the category differed by at least 30% from that of another group.

### Meaning of Career Success

Our content analysis of participants' responses suggests that career success is viewed in several ways. Consistent with the literature, we grouped the various ways participants defined career success into the two broad domains of objective and subjective career success. Table 2 presents the main categories that emerged from our analyses for each of these two domains, along with sample quotations for illustration.

Within the objective career success domain, three main categories emerged: achievement (material-based), ability to support family, and formal learning. Achievement refers to the attainment of extrinsic rewards and recognition such as monetary rewards, hierarchical position, and reputation. This was the most common way for defining career success, with the majority of the participants expressing views that centered on this category. Participants typically viewed achievement as financial achievement and spoke of financial independence and earning power.

I want to have my financial freedom. Of course, as a financial planner, all the financial planners should have financial freedom because that's the reason we're working. We want to be free, you know. That's the main reason we're working. [BU-E2]

**Table 2**  
Meaning of Career Success: Number of Participants Mentioning and Sample Comments

Category	Sample Comments
<b>Objective Factor</b>	
Achievement	Career success means making it to the top. [BU-L1]
Ability to support family	You are able to give your children the necessary tertiary education. [BU-L2]
Formal learning	Achievement is if I can take up more courses apart from this diploma. [NU-E1]
<b>Subjective Factor</b>	
Making a difference	To me, career success is not only getting all those credentials, but to me, how good I am at contributing to the society. [NU-L1]
Satisfaction	Career success for me is satisfaction. [BU-L3]
Work-life balance	What's important to me is to be with my family and by having a family business, we will always be together. [BC-E1]
Goal fulfillment	Career success to me means achieving the target you have set for yourself with regard to your career. [BC-E1]
Informal learning	When you are at the top... you also gain knowledge. [BU-L1]

The most important is to be able to earn better salary. Can earn better salary means the job is an ideal one... Of course everyone wants to be successful. To me that means being able to earn more money. [BC-E2]

Some participants identified career success with hierarchical advancement, be it within an organization or across organizations. One young, human resource professional working for a multinational company who had just experienced a lateral job transfer said, "Career success? Progression from one job to another and moving from one company to a better one..." [BU-E3], and an older blue-collar worker said, "Career-wise, the most important is to go higher and higher. To one day be the manager or at least an assistant manager" [BC-L1]. Finally, three participants linked career success to self-employment. They seemed to like the idea of being in control by being their own boss, as explained by one young financial planner: "First of all, career success for me is to be my own boss, my own company, have my driver, you know" [BU-E2].

Achievement as an indicator of career success was mentioned by participants in all three occupational groups. More early-stage career participants, however, placed value on achievement than did their late-stage counterparts. In addition to achievement, being able to support one's family through one's income was associated with objective career success. One late-stage career blue-collar worker put it this way:

... and of course to a certain extent the financial aspect of it definitely plays a part because you want to care for your family. But not to a point where I'm really like striving after the wind in wanting to better myself financially at the expense of my family being neglected as regards to giving them quality time and seeing to their needs. [BC-L2]

Finally, the importance of continuous formal education emerged as a category among the nurses. One early-stage career nurse when asked what it would take for her to consider herself as being successful, stated: "If I become a tutor and get a PHD" [NU-E1]. This sentiment was shared by a late-stage career nurse: "If I get my PhD. If I can manage to finish my master and continue for my PhD before my retirement, maybe to me that is my career success" [NU-L3]. Neither the business nor the blue-collar group included formal education in their measure of career success.

Within the subjective career success domain, five main categories emerged: making a difference, satisfaction, work-life balance, goal fulfillment, and informal learning. Making a difference emerged as the most important category for defining subjective career success, with the majority of the participants viewing success in this manner. For these participants, making a difference meant having a positive impact on others within their immediate sphere of influence as well as on the community at large. They saw themselves as having achieved success if they made an impact through developing people under their care and helping them become successful, sharing of knowledge and expertise, or extending help to those who need it through charity or other means. These more altruistic and collective forms of defining career success were echoed as follows:

After Federal Power, I started my own consulting company and made a lot of money. It was at this time that I wanted to take a break. I also wanted to contribute back to society by sharing my corporate knowledge. An associate suggested that I join a university... I enjoy working with students. I also can contribute to the university by helping them network with industry people and sharing practical knowledge with students. [BU-L1]

A successful nurse is someone who can really help the patients, give good care, giving all the care that a patient needs, be sincere, not expecting to be praised or rewarded for what she does. It's when I see a patient leave the ward healthy and happy. [NU-E2]

None of the participants in the blue-collar group spoke of making a difference as a measure of career success. Perhaps, people in this group did not see their present job as one that could make much of a difference to society. There was also some variation between early-stage and late-stage career participants with regard to this category, with most of the participants being from the late-stage career group. Understandably, people in the early stage of their career may be more self-focused at this point in their career life.

Another subjective career success category that emerged was satisfaction. This refers to the extent to which one is pleased and content with one's career outcomes. Participants who saw career success in the realm of their own personal satisfaction described satisfaction in the context of finding satisfaction, enjoyment, and happiness in what they were doing. For example, one early-stage career nurse explained, "Success is when you care for a baby, for patients, you really feel satisfied" [NU-E1]. With regard to enjoyment, an early-stage career businessman stated, "For me, it must be interest. It must be something that you are interested in" [BU-E1]. Finally, a late-stage career blue-collar worker said, "So I guess for me really a simple life meaning happiness in the job that I'm doing. I'm very contented with it and I guess that's what career success means, especially in this new spiritual outlook that I'm in" [BC-L2].

Some participants also spoke of achieving work-life balance – the successful management of work and non-work dimensions of one's life – as an indicator of career success. The discussion of work-life balance focused on striking a balance between material wealth and spiritual well-being, work and family, and work and non-work interests, as illustrated by the following comments.

So to me, balance between the spiritual and material elements is most important in my business. I must be able to keep the balance between the world today and what I need to have in the afterlife. Then, I would say that I have achieved success. [BU-E1]

But right now I would say that I'm really happy and contented. Well, I guess, of course, you would not refuse a good offer, so to speak. But then again because of my spiritual outlook, I will frankly say that I will not trade anything else for the situation that I'm in right now because I have more time for my family. [BC-L2]

One participant from each occupational group also felt successful when they experienced a sense of having achieved a goal. Interestingly, all of them related to goal fulfillment in the context of self-set goals and not externally assigned goals. In the words of one late-stage career businesswoman, "But every job I had, I had an objective and that was to overcome the obstacles that I was facing and be successful in that particular job that I had" [BU-L3].

Finally, informal learning emerged as a unique category for the business group, with people in this group mentioning learning gained in the course of their career as indicative of having achieved success. A late-stage career businesswoman, who had held a number of different jobs related to training and education prior to running her own educational institution, stated "... then I went to East-West Center, met people that I learned from so I think those are important events, because really life is a growing thing – you never stop learning and you're always curious how things happened, and that's the way with me" [BU-L3].

In sum, the participants in this study viewed career success in both objective and subjective terms. Overall, five of the eight important categories that emerged for defining career success were common to all occupational groups and six of these categories were common to the two career stage groups. The businesspeople and nurses defined career success using a more diversified perspective relative to their blue-collar counterparts. Categories unique to an occupational group (i.e., named by only one group) were formal learning and informal learning, with formal learning mentioned by only nurses and informal learning mentioned by only the business group. No category was unique to blue-collar workers, and none of them saw making a difference as an indicator of career success. Finally, early-stage career participants saw career success as related more to achievement and less to making a difference relative to late-stage career participants.

### Influencing Factors of Career Success

Our content analysis of participants' responses regarding what they saw as factors that influenced career success resulted in nine main categories, which we grouped into two broad domains: internal factors (six categories) and external factors (three categories). Table 3 presents the main categories that emerged from our analyses for each of these two domains, along with sample quotations for illustration.

The six categories under the internal factor domain were traits, skills, personal history, motives, ongoing learning, and career management. Traits – relatively stable, enduring patterns of how individuals feel, think, and behave across situations (Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006) – was the most frequently mentioned internal factor with two-thirds of the participants identifying it as a determinant of career success. Specific traits mentioned included good work ethic, persistence, self-reliance, and a positive attitude. The following statement illustrates the importance participants attributed to this factor.

There's no point in being educated if there's no discipline. Behaving responsibly when put in a position of trust. In Islam we say do what is right in the service of God and humankind. Also, honesty and sincerity in carrying out our work. Don't be so calculative. For me if I'm paid 100%, I would work as if I've been paid 150%. [BC-L3]

Skills – capacities needed to perform a set of tasks that are acquired through training and experience (Dunnette, 1976) – were mentioned by a third of the participants. In our data we identified more examples of soft skills than of hard skills as contributing to career success. The soft skills mentioned related mainly to socio-emotional skills that enabled one to socialize and network effectively as well as to be self-aware. An illustrative comment is "Social relation-

**Table 3**  
Factors Influencing Career Success: Number of Participants Mentioning and Sample Comments

Category	Sample Comments
<b>Internal Factor</b>	
Traits	Discipline. Hard work. There is no shortcut to success. For me, I work long hours. [BU-L1]
Skills	It is also most important that you must get along with all the people, whether below you or above you. [BC-L1]
Personal history	For career success, education is important. [BU-L2]
Motives	Another important factor is enthusiasm. [BU-E2]
Ongoing learning	We must continue learning. We must have more knowledge. Take up more courses, not just one. [NU-E1]
Career management	I have my plans, and I have learned that the plan would not succeed if I do not execute it. [BU-E1]
<b>External Factor</b>	
Work context	... relationships between the colleagues that will help you become a success. [NU-E3]
Social context	For me the most important is personality, then family support... [NU-E3]
Societal context	During my time racial background has no great impact, but now after 20 over years racial background has great impact. [BU-L2]

ships, they're important because if you don't have social relationships, people would not know you" [BU-L2]. One young human resource professional also talked about the importance of impression management in promoting one's career.

I would say one thing that I'm lacking of but I wish I do have is the ability to play well in office politics. I'm not saying sucking up to your boss or things like that, but to be visible, to be seen as you're doing your job... Then, you'll get the progress faster. [BU-E3]

Personal history, that is one's family and educational background, also emerged as an internal influencing category and was reported by a third of the participants. For example, a late-stage career blue-collar worker identified parental teachings as a factor contributing to his career success, saying: "My brothers are mostly educators and my father is a very disciplined person. That has influenced me to be a responsible person at work. Family values and upbringing are important" [BC-L3]. While reflecting on the role of family support, a young businessman who had ventured into business with the financial backing from his father stated: "For me, I'm lucky because my dad has paved the path and set it up for me. So, I can see what business is" [BU-E1]. In addition to family influence, this same businessman also recognized the importance of education in achieving career success, saying "I would say that I am successful today because of my basic education from the primary school. Without that, I wouldn't be who I am now" [BU-E1]. Blue-collar workers, in particular, saw their lack of tertiary education as a limiting factor in their career progression. An early-stage career blue-collar worker commented:

Considering my SPM results, I think this is the only job that I could get. I really regretted for not studying harder during my school years. If I had done well in my SPM, I could have secured a better job or even further my study at the university and later get an even better job with higher salary. [BC-E1]

Motives – factors that drive one's motivation and, in turn, behavior – also emerged as a category with some participants perceiving career success to depend on motives such as ambition, determination,

and enthusiasm. One young businessman noted the importance of liking what one is doing also. He stated: "But whatever it is, to succeed in that area you must like it, have interest, so that you can succeed. If you don't have interest, then you won't do your best" [BU-E1].

The importance of ongoing learning as an internal career success determinant also emerged. Ongoing learning refers to both formal and informal training and development one engaged in past the usual educational and training period required to enter a career. Participants stated the need to take additional formal courses, and one participant believed that breadth of job experience was important. This latter participant explained:

On the average, I think my career changes have been very minimal, compared to others that I know. But even then each change I made I learnt something different. I brought with me the experiences of the past jobs into the new job. [BU-L3]

The final internal career success determinant that emerged as a category was career management. This refers to the extent to which one takes an active role in evaluating, planning, and pursuing career goals. The participants mentioning this factor talked about the importance of setting career goals, identifying new opportunities, and managing one's career by having one's own business.

The three categories under the external factor domain were work context, social context, and societal context. Work context, which relates to the various psychosocial and resource support and barriers one encounters in the workplace, emerged as the most common factor believed to influence career success. This was an issue particularly for late-stage career participants. The source of support and barriers were seen to come from both individuals (e.g., peers and supervisors) and the organization. For example, an older businesswoman spoke about how she received minimal support from her business partners and saw their lack of involvement in the business to have impeded the growth of the company. She also talked about the importance of financial resources, saying:

I have no doubt that I can run a business at this stage after so long, but I'll be a bit more careful and make sure that I have the right product and the right amount of money, and if I have both and the support of somebody who's really financially stable, you know, then we can move ahead. But I think without those in place I would not take the whole step of starting a business. [BU-L3]

With regard to supervisory support, an older nurse complained about the lack of support from her head of department when she wanted to register for a graduate degree in nursing. Another older nurse perceived organizational discrimination to be an obstacle to her career advancement, saying:

For example, you see my career life. Why it took me 10 years to qualify for midwifery? When I first qualified, I think in the first few years, already I was very interested in midwifery. But something blocked it – they said let the seniors go first... I've been applying since 1985. I think in one year I've been applying two to three times and every time rejected, rejected, rejected. [NU-L3]

Beyond the work context, participants also believed that the non-work social context, primarily in the form of family support, played an important role in influencing career success. While reflecting on the role of family in their career success, participants recognized their spouse and children as those who understood their work demands. A late-stage career nurse said: "At the same time, my husband is very supportive, and I think my children also understand well, because we do talk about it, explain to each other" [NU-L2].

Finally, some participants mentioned societal context (e.g., resource barriers) as having an influence on one's career success.

Interestingly, all were late-stage career people, and they primarily spoke of barriers in the form of government policies that they saw as discriminatory. A Chinese businesswoman, while acknowledging that she did not personally experience any animosity or difficulties because of her ethnic background, felt that her company had more difficulties dealing with government agencies because it was a non-Malay company.

From a business point of view, of course, there are difficulties because there are certain regulations that you've got to comply with, and if you're of a different race, there are limitations and hurdles that you have to jump over, which you probably may not need to do so if you were slightly different. [BU-L3]

In sum, although the participants in this study attributed career success to both internal and external factors, more internal categories emerged than external ones. Also, in our data we identified more examples of internal influencing factors than of external influencing factors. With regard to occupational and career stage differences, all but one of the six career success influencing factor categories that emerged were common to all occupational groups, and one of the three categories were common to the two career stage groups. Relative to blue-collar workers, businesspeople were more likely to view motives as important for career success. Finally, late-stage career participants were more likely to see work and societal context as having an influence on career success.

## Discussion

### Discussion of Findings

Our analysis of the qualitative evidence from this study allowed for some trends to emerge. The fact that material-based achievement emerged as the most common definition of career success is at once expected but surprising. It is expected because it matches the classic objective career success as outlined in the literature and is congruent with commonly mentioned definitions of career success in other countries (cf. Briscoe et al., 2011). It is unexpected because Malaysia is a more collectivistic (Hofstede, 2001) or embedded (Schwartz, 2006) culture that emphasizes quality of life at least as much as traditional career success (in Adler & Gundersen's, 2008 interpretation). This would seem to imply that a communal orientation wherein one meets one's social obligations is adequate for obtaining career success. On the other hand, Malaysia is relatively high in power distance (Hofstede, 2001) and hierarchy (Schwartz, 2006). Perhaps, the easily observed differences in power magnify its advantages and thus motivate the achievements that grant or represent such power. A more simple explanation is that people in Malaysia, in spite of some culture differences, are not dramatically different from other national cultures in a basic need to achieve (McClelland, 1961).

With regard to career stage differences, the qualitative evidence indicated that younger career actors were more likely to define career success in terms of achievement and less likely to define it in terms of making a difference. A question that is impossible to answer from this data alone is whether these differences reflect values of different eras or if they reflect a certain change of perspective based upon experience and achievement.

Our analysis of the qualitative evidence also revealed that nurses reported career success in formal learning and businesspeople reported career success in informal learning. On the other hand, there was no report of learning as a form of career success reported by any blue-collar worker. What is behind this? Is it an existential question or a practical one for these different employee categories? Is it explainable by the structure of the three occupations? After all, progression in nursing is dependent upon formal learning; supervision in blue-collar occupations is strict, not affording many chances

to exercise autonomy; and, business offers the most freedom of the three occupations.

We also found businesspeople to be more likely than even nurses to report that *making a difference* was a key subjective measurement of career success for them. This is contrary to stereotypes sometimes encountered about businesspeople as only being oriented to financial gain, and again raises the question as to whether the relative freedom of the business sector (probably combined with the practical factor of the relative prosperity it offers) inculcates a different perspective.

Turning to the perceived influences upon career success, the evidence indicated that individual traits were the dominant influence perceived by the participants and that external influences were underemphasized. This was true across the three occupations and two career stages. This suggests a fairly strong view of personal influence borne from character. A key question is: are the character traits cited seen as developed by the person, inherited from one's family, spiritual, or genetic?

A few participants cited societal context as an external influence upon their career success, and these were non-Malays. Although most participants emphasized traits and did not report experiencing society as a constraint, perceived discrimination must be considered, even on the part of a few, as a possible factor and potential inhibition to career growth and opportunities. Although nobody cited the societal context for the positive force it plays, it is probably an underappreciated supporting factor when one considers that almost all the reported influencing factors were contained to internal factors.

### Study Implications

An important implication of the study is that career success in Malaysia cannot be simply dichotomized between objective and subjective career success. Although achievement is dominant, three key types of objective career success were identified and five types of subjective career success were identified. This suggests that a simple approach to motivating Malaysian working adults based upon career goals is not a practical notion.

Some simplification can be found in relation to people in the beginning of their career and those toward the end of their career. The former seems to value achievement and be less concerned about making a difference than do the latter. Thus, employers need to provide a visible sequence of career advancement opportunities for those in the early stage of their career. Although a more instrumental approach may work with early stage career people, this may not be the case for late stage career people. Because the latter are far more varied in their career aspirations, a one-size-fits-all approach is definitely not realistic. People toward the later chapters of their career in Malaysia will likely be appreciative of options and of chances to discuss different career possibilities.

### Study Limitations and Future Research

Our study needs to be considered in light of its limitations. First, as with any qualitative study that relies on a small sample, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings beyond the present sample. Our focus on only three occupational groups also means that the participants in this study are not necessarily representative of the general working population. In addition, because our study was conducted in Malaysia, the findings are geographically constrained.

Second, like many interviews, the data here may be subject to social desirability bias. One might argue that people are claiming what they *think* career success should be versus what they really think it is. Nevertheless, it can be argued also that such a projection would in fact represent the same data – impressions of what constitute career success. With regard to *influences* on career success, we readily acknowledge that what we assessed were *perceptions* of influence

and not influence itself. People may not always be in the best position to assess the influences outside of themselves that may impact behavior and events.

Finally, the lack of a quantitative operationalization and testing of the constructs means we cannot yet answer precise questions about specific populations or test theory. This limitation is easily remedied through future research. Although the patterns that emerged are not formal tests of the categories identified, the categories generated from this stage of the research suggest several hypotheses that might be studied. This includes the prediction that younger career actors are more likely to emphasize achievement and deemphasize making a difference and Malaysian employees are more likely to attribute their career success to personal traits and less likely to attribute it to outside influences.

## Conclusion

To conclude, our research extends previous career success research by contributing an additional base of information regarding career success and factors that are perceived to influence it. Achievement appears to be the predominant focus although other objective types of success such as caring for loved ones by providing financial support were also cited. Amongst later stage career actors, making a difference is a key factor in career success. Traits are seen as the primary influence on career success across the various groups interviewed. We hope this exploratory study will be helpful to other researchers in designing future studies. We also hope further research will reveal whether or not changes in Malaysian career contexts can be effectively managed through career development and the degree to which the Malaysian career experience differs from other cultures.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare no conflict of interest.

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