

Beyond money: Developing multiple paths to career success

A study coauthored by IESE's Mireia Las Heras, shows definitions of success are in flux around the globe and HR professionals need to adapt to this reality.

March 6, 2015

A generation ago workers and companies entered upon a psychological contract that started with a welcoming handshake after university and ended with a gold-watch at retirement.

Today, employment contracts are more dynamic: they involve the exchange of mutually satisfying contributions, while expectations and desires tend to change over time.

Job security may be more tenuous, but individuals are becoming drivers who decide their own career destinies. This shift means that workers around the world measure their success using criteria that go beyond promotions and payments.

In "Career Success Across 11 Countries: Implications for International Human Resource Management," an international team of 18 co-authors, including IESE's [Mireia Las Heras](#), explore just what those criteria are and what they mean in practice.

New approaches for a new era

The emerging reality at work -- with its increasing personal agency regarding career development -- is described as "agentic" by the co-authors. It's a mindset with few boundaries which is self-directed and values-driven. This agentic phenomenon joins traditional ways of understanding success in the workplace, which fall into two broad categories: the idea that the same incentives and rewards motivate workers everywhere, and the conflicting view that cultural context significantly influences the value individuals strive

to gain from their careers.

There may be some universal truths about what success really means, but a closer inspection reveals a picture of overlapping motivators, values and desires varying around the globe.

Multinational challenges

Multinational corporations have the challenge of dealing with different countries and values systems and, at the same time, trying to foster a unifying corporate culture and mission across the globe. This not only means interacting with different countries, but with different kinds of countries. In a bid to recreate this experience, the authors sought to go beyond the existing research, which largely focuses on western, educated, industrialized democracies.

To this end, interviews were conducted with 226 individuals in 11 countries (Austria, China, Costa Rica, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Serbia, South Africa, Spain and the United States) to capture perceptions of career success. The following major categories were evaluated:

1. *Achievement*
2. *Job/task characteristics*
3. *Satisfaction*
4. *Learning and development*
5. *Making a difference*
6. *Work-life context/balance*
7. *Survival and security*
8. *Social working environment*
9. *Recognition*
10. *Job performance*
11. *Self-actualization*

Universal truths and diverging opinions

Despite the geographic and cultural diversity of the sample, the *achievement* category was most commonly associated with career success. While interviewees had varying definitions of achievement, only "financial achievement" was commonly identified in the sample.

Next on the list, nine out of 11 countries identified *job/task characteristics* (i.e., work that has intrinsic meaning) as important indicators of career success. This category had a range of interpretations including "tackling challenges," "working with others" and finding "opportunities for learning."

Culture can be decisive in how employees perceive the value of work, the study found. Subjects in the U.S. and Japan placed a great deal of importance on *recognition*, for example, while in China subjects instead stressed *survival and security*.

Making a difference, understood as helping others or having a positive impact upon society, was one of the four most important categories for subjects in the U.S., South Africa and Malaysia. Meanwhile, respondents in Serbia and Spain identified *work-life context/balance* as a dominant theme.

A hybrid approach

These findings demonstrate a wide range of differences in how people from different countries define career success. *Achievement*, in the form of financial success, may be a universal value, but the variations in interpretations of career success around the world could have important implications for human resource management (HRM) practices. Financial incentives may work as motivators in many cases, but the authors argue for more "boutique" solutions catered to workers on a more individual level.

Effective multinationals need to be flexible. While the common responses indicate that overarching systems to address financial achievement are appropriate across the company, a more nuanced approach may work better to address the other categories.

Regional differences can play an important role here. A strong work-family program could be a priority in Spain, for example. Conversely, young Chinese employees who value learning and development could gain from short- or long-term stints in other countries. It's not a one-size-fits-all formula, but in an era of shifting organization-employee relations, that's the point. Striking a balance between universal and specific truths can maximize benefits for everyone.

www.iese.edu/insight