

WELL BEGUN IS HALF DONE: THE ROLE OF CAREER COMPETENCIES IN YOUNG EMPLOYEES' WELL-BEING, PERFORMANCE AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

DR. JOS AKKERMANS,
VU UNIVERSITY AMSTERDAM



In this article, I will argue that it is crucial for young employees to gain career competencies in order to be productive and successful. Specifically, the research I performed with my colleagues shows that young workers particularly need reflective, communicative and behavioural career competencies, and that these competencies can lead to enhanced performance and well-being. We also demonstrate that an intervention based on these career competencies can enhance the career competency development, employability and work engagement of young employees. I will elaborate on this research below.

In the current dynamic labour market, employees increasingly need to take responsibility for their own careers. There is a growing emphasis on flexibility, unpredictability and the need for continuous learning and development, which makes it crucial that employees proactively self-manage their work and careers in order to be productive and successful. However, these developments may have a profound effect, especially on young employees who are still at the start of their working lives. These young workers go through many changes (e.g., a socialization period, forming a professional identity, and finding a fitting job) in a relatively brief period of

time, and they often face difficult challenges such as job mismatches, poor working conditions and underemployment. Indeed, statistics show that young employees have been hit hardest by the worldwide economic crisis of the past few years, with an alarming average EU youth unemployment rate of 28%. These issues clearly demonstrate that it is crucial to support young adults during the first years of their professional careers, in order for them to experience a successful transition to working life and lay the foundation for their sustainable employability, and for organizations to have a productive and innovative young workforce.

The first contribution we make in this area focuses on the development of a framework of career competencies. Our research shows that young workers particularly need reflective (i.e., reflection on motivation and reflection on qualities), communicative (i.e., networking and self-profiling) and behavioural (i.e., work exploration and career control) career competencies. Developing these competencies will lead to improved career-related outcomes such as enhanced career motivation and employability. Moreover, we also find that career competency development is closely linked to work-related outcomes. Specifically, career competencies and

job resources, such as autonomy, social support, and opportunities for development, can enhance each other and subsequently lead to higher levels of work engagement among young workers. For example, opportunities for development at work can increase a young worker's reflective competencies, which will subsequently increase engagement. This also works the other way around: developing reflective career competencies can increase the awareness of available opportunities for development, which will in turn increase work engagement. Thus, career competencies are important both for self-management of work and careers of young employees.

A second contribution is that we developed the CareerSKILLS intervention: a brief group-training method that focuses on the six career competencies mentioned above. Moreover, this intervention is based on the JOBS methodology, a training method that has been shown to be effective in the US, Finland and the Netherlands. This methodology focuses on increasing self-efficacy (i.e., one's belief in one's ability to successfully perform a certain behaviour) and resilience against potential obstacles, and is characterized by active learning processes. The intervention consists of four sessions of 4 hours that take place over two weeks, and is followed by a final session a month later. We implemented CareerSKILLS in a large educational organization and in a multinational organization, and empirically tested whether the intervention was effective by conducting surveys directly before the first session, directly after the fourth session,

and finally, directly after the fifth session. Our results strongly support the effectiveness of the intervention: compared to a control group, participants in the intervention report higher levels of career competencies, career-related behaviours, employability, and work engagement directly after the intervention. Moreover, this effect remains stable after a month in both organizations. We conclude that the CareerSKILLS intervention is an effective way of increasing young workers' career competencies, employability and well-being, and it is a promising tool for supporting them in their early careers.

Our findings have several implications for managers, HR departments and career counsellors. First of all, we have developed and empirically tested two tools that can be used to assess and improve career competencies: the Career Competencies Questionnaire (CCQ) and the CareerSKILLS intervention. HR managers and career counsellors can use the CCQ as a monitoring tool and as a diagnostic instrument. For example, this tool could be implemented among young workers on a regular basis to assess their progress in their mastery of career competencies, which could subsequently form important input for further interventions regarding their

personal development. In addition, the CareerSKILLS intervention could become part of HR policies for young workers, for example as a standard training programme during their socialization period in an organization. A second implication is that our research, including other studies that we performed, shows that young workers may have a particular need for positive stimulation and motivation. That is, providing them with sufficient job resources such as opportunities for development and autonomy, together with a chance to develop their career competencies, may be the key to a sustainably employable and productive young workforce. Managers and HR professionals can take this into account when making decisions about the design of work and the conditions associated with young employees' jobs. For example, they could ensure that sufficient levels of autonomy are integrated in young workers' jobs, and provide them with substantial managerial support. In addition, it may be important to enable young workers to engage in job crafting behaviours, where they can adapt minor aspects of their work (e.g., working from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. instead of the 'regular 9 to 5') to increase their well-being, productivity, and development. Providing challenging jobs that enable young workers to manage their work and careers proactively would constitute an important start to having a productive and innovative organization, and at the same time a young workforce with high levels of performance and career development.

Dr. Jos Akkermans is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Management and Organization at VU University Amsterdam. His research

focuses primarily on the career development, well-being and employability of young professionals. He is particularly interested in the creation of so-called 'smart jobs', that is, jobs that are designed in such a way that they enable employees to perform well and continuously develop themselves. Jos is the Director of the Amsterdam Center for Career Research and a board member of the Netherlands Foundation for Management Development.

For further inquiries about the research project, please contact Dr. Jos Akkermans, j.akkermans@vu.nl.

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