

Individuals' Career Growth Within and Across Organizations: A Review and Agenda for Future Research

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Abstract

The tremendous changes occurring in the work environment encourage new studies to update our knowledge about what determines ones' career growth within and across organizations. Seven papers from a pool of submissions are presented in this special issue. We summarize how the seven papers included in this special issue contribute to our understanding beyond previous research and identify directions for future research. As a result of this special issue, we urge researchers to (a) identify other determinants of career growth, (b) enrich the theoretical framework connecting career growth with individuals' attitudes and behaviors, (c) distinguish the roles of intrinsic and extrinsic career growth, (d) incorporate work context and career stage in future research, and (e) further explore the benefits of organizations' investment on employees' career growth in the new career era.

Keywords

organizational career growth, individual career growth, career mobility

Career growth, which refers to one's career progress within or across organizations, has been an important topic in the vocational psychology literature for decades. Researchers have made significant progress in understanding why some people are more successful than others throughout the span of their careers (e.g., Ng et al., 2005; Seibert et al., 2001). More recently, Weng and colleagues (2010) proposed the concept of organizational career growth to distinguish one's sense of career growth while working within a single organization (e.g., Wang et al., 2014; Weng & McElroy, 2012; Weng et al., 2010). The research by Weng and colleagues (2010) suggests that organizational career growth is more predictable and more closely associated with individual attitudes and behaviors than is career success, which emphasizes an employee's overall career span and considers both intraorganizational and interorganizational career development.

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This special issue aims to update our understanding of individual career growth within and across organizations. Previous work in this area raised several important research questions such as which managerial practices advance employees' organizational career growth, why some individuals are more successful at career mobility than others either within or between organizations, and which personal factors determine individual career growth, to name a few. It was in light of questions like these that we developed this special issue and issued a call for papers on this topic.

The seven papers chosen for inclusion in this special issue address some of the questions raised above, as well as additional relevant issues surrounding career growth and development in and between organizations. To provide a comprehensive overview of the progress in this field, we not only summarize the contributions of these papers but also review other relevant studies that are critical to the career development literature. In doing so, we group our discussion around a series of questions. Following the literature review, we make several recommendations for future study.

Is Individual Career Growth Related to Demographic, Personality, or Individual Attitudinal Differences?

Addressing this question requires further exploration of how individual differences influence one's career growth. Individual differences are captured by sociodemographic variables such as gender, race, age, and family backgrounds, as well as by knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA), education level, and personality (Sackett et al., 2017). With respect to the role of gender on one's career growth, previous studies (Ismail, 2003; Wang et al., 2014; Weng et al., 2010) found that men experience more successful career progress and remuneration growth than do women. Previous studies have also connected career outcomes with proactive personality (Zhao et al., 2016), the Big Five personality traits (Opayemi & Balogun, 2011), core self-evaluation (da Motta Veiga, 2015; Judge & Bono, 2001; Judge & Hurst, 2007), career orientation (Arnold & Clark, 2016), and boundaryless mindset (Verbruggen, 2012).

Five articles included in this special issue consider the role of individual differences in one's career growth. The first article, by Patton and Doherty (2019), introduces family issues as a personal factor that can affect career growth. This article discusses how family issues can facilitate or undermine attempts to transfer an employee to a new location.

Drawing on career adaptability theory, the second article in this volume, by Bonnici and Cassar (2019), suggests that personal trait and self-regulation capacity are essential for career growth as they relate to career adaptability resources. These resources, in turn, can be used to define their roles according to the contextual realities, even in contexts that restrict employee mobility. This article also identifies the specific forms of KSA including the development of a professional profile, range of skills, academic qualifications, and recognition that can shape the perceptions about the career development prospects of research managers and administrators.

Drawing on role congruity theory, the third article by van Osch and Schaveling (2019) explores how job status (part time/full time) and gender influence the dimensions of organizational career growth. The results not only highlight the importance of job status but also reveal an interesting interaction effect between job status and gender on career outcomes. That is, men who work part-time experience less goal progress, fewer opportunities for ability development, and slower promotion speed than do females who work either full time or part time as well as males who work full time. This study also showed that other individual difference factors, namely, age, education, and work commitment, were significantly correlated with at least one dimension of career growth.

The fourth article, by Spagnoli (2019), considers the roles of gender, parenthood (parents vs. no parents), and tenure (newcomers vs. long-term employees) in determining employees' organizational career growth. As predicted, Spagnoli (2019) found that males and long-term employees significantly experience more successful career growth within their organization than do women and newcomers, respectively. While this study did not find significant effects for parenthood, it suggests that there

might be an interaction effect between parenthood and gender such that female parents are at a disadvantage for developing careers in organizations, especially within companies that do not have a “family-friendly” culture.

Finally, the last article by Vande Griek et al. (2019) uses social cognitive theory in proposing that proactive personality interacts with career growth in influencing employee behavior. People who are more proactive perceive more opportunities for career growth within the organization, and career stage moderates the relationship as proactive individuals respond differently to the opportunities brought by career growth in different career stages.

Why Do Some Individuals Experience More Successful Career Mobility?

Career growth is a form of upward career mobility within and between organizations. In addition to the variance that can be explained by individual differences, other studies address why some individuals experience more successful career mobility. Despite the significance of individual differences in career growth, the question arises as to “why some individuals are more successful in career mobility” than others who have similar backgrounds and KSAs. Answering this question would reveal the underlying mechanisms behind the formation of career growth, but relevant research is limited. Before this issue, only one study (Chen et al., 2015) attempted to answer this question from a person–organization fit perspective. This study demonstrates that employees who have congruent characteristics with their organizations are more likely to get their efforts recognized and rewarded by the organization, thus achieving more successful career growth.

Two articles in this issue further improve our understanding of the mechanisms behind upward career mobility. First, considering the increasing career opportunities brought by mobility, Patton and Doherty (2019) focus on career mobility between organizations. They explore the complexity of career mobility with an emphasis on family situations. Through synthesizing conceptual and empirical work from the fields of both sociology and career development, this study considers various elements relevant to career mobility, such as gender implications of mobility, families with children, family and work decisions, and women’s careers. Patton and Doherty’s (2019) findings highlight that family is a critical factor in individual career decision making, one that bears the brunt brought by workforce mobility and demonstrates that the complexities of family life help explain the success or failure associated with mobility. In doing so, this study inspires future researchers to take a multidisciplinary approach to better understanding the mechanism behind successful career mobility.

The second article addressing this is also about career mobility, but it focuses on mobility within an organization (Weer & Greenhaus, 2019). Incorporating affordance theory, signaling theory, and a cognitive processing perspective, the authors highlight the importance of the manager’s perceptions in career growth. This study proposes that managers use employee attitudes and behaviors as cues to assess employee affective commitment to the organization and that employees perceived as being highly committed to the organization would experience enhanced career growth opportunities. Specifically, they report that managerial perceptions of employee extra-role performance and work engagement lead to those managers promoting two types of organizational career growth for their employees, namely structural career growth opportunities and content career growth opportunities.

Which Managerial Practices Could Advance Employees’ Organizational Career Growth?

Career growth is dependent upon both the individual and the organization. This suggests that it is worth exploring those managerial practices that can advance employee organizational career growth. Existing studies have found that work support can promote organizational career growth among nurses (Yang et al., 2015); organizational training programs and organization’s prestige positively relate to

career growth opportunities (Nouri & Parker, 2013), and mentoring leads to pay raises and promotions (Arokiasamy & Ismail, 2008; Seibert et al., 2001; Turban et al., 2017).

While there is a lack of in-depth analysis of this question in the articles selected here, several articles do suggest that managerial practices may influence career growth. For example, Bonnici and Cassar (2019) recommend that professional associations should tailor curricula and training activities to equip research managers and administrators with adaptability resources, which enables those employees to maintain their relevance to their profession. In addition, Bonnici and Cassar (2019), along with Vande Griek et al. (2019), emphasize the importance of career counseling in promoting individual career growth. Kwon and Cho (2019) get even more specific in suggesting that employers use the employee value proposition as a communication tool to clarify the specific opportunities for career growth available and to decrease the gaps between employees' expectations and the realities of career development. They also highlight the significance of providing career-related feedback to employees as part of their professional ability development. Finally, Spagnoli (2019) proposes that managers should support employees' careers through a whole-life approach, which is consistent with Patton and Doherty's (2019) call for consideration of the family in mobility decisions.

Could Work Context Moderate the Relationships Between Individual Factors and Organizational Career Growth?

Context is an important factor in studying career growth. In addition to the individual context and organizational context, the broader work context should also be considered in studies on career growth. Since proposing the concept of organizational career growth, scholars have examined the factorial validity of the Career Growth Scale, providing additional support that it is a valid assessment of organizational career growth in different cultures (Kim et al., 2016; Spagnoli & Weng, 2017). Based on that, a growing number of studies have explored the relationships between career growth and various factors in different countries such as China (Chen et al., 2015; Weng et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2015), Korea (Kim et al., 2016), the United States (Nouri & Parker, 2013), Turkey (Karavardar, 2014), and Nigeria (Ohunakin et al., 2018; Opayemi & Balogun, 2011). Research has also focused on career growth within specific occupational groups such as nurses (Yang et al., 2015), junior auditors in public accounting firms (Nouri & Parker, 2013), teachers (Strahan, 2016), and frontline employees in the hospitality industry (Ohunakin et al., 2018).

Five articles in this special issue also target samples from different occupations in different countries including South Korean trainers (Kwon & Cho, 2019), employees from Italy (Spagnoli, 2019), research managers and administrators in small island states (Bonnici & Cassar, 2019), legal secretaries and their managers from five law firms located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States (Weer & Greenhaus, 2019), and executive students and colleagues from the banking sector in the Netherlands (van Osch & Schaveling, 2019). Among them, the article written by Bonnici and Cassar (2019) takes it a step further in conducting an in-depth analysis of one specific work context: university managers and administrators in small island states. Combining the features of universities in small island states and the role of research managers and administrators, Bonnici and Cassar (2019) discuss several factors that shape career development prospects and how research managers and administrators adapt their roles according to the contextual realities they face. Thus, this study provides an example of how work context can be incorporated into the study of career growth.

What Other Positive Organizational Attitudes and Behaviors Is Career Growth Related to?

Individual perceptions of career growth can also affect employee attitudes and behaviors toward the organization. Previous research has focused on the attitudinal outcomes associated with career growth including turnover intentions (Chen et al., 2015; Karavardar, 2014; Kim et al., 2016; Weng &

McElroy, 2012; Yang et al., 2015), job satisfaction (Chen et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2016), organizational commitment (Weng et al., 2010), affective vocational commitment (Weng & McElroy, 2012), organizational citizenship behavior (Okurame, 2012), and voice (Wang et al., 2014).

In this special issue, three articles consider behavioral as well as attitudinal outcomes of career growth. For example, Kwon and Cho (2019) report that professional ability development, as a dimension of career growth, has significant positive impacts on informal learning and job involvement. Following the theory of work adjustment, Spagnoli (2019) considers both the attitudinal outcome, job satisfaction, and the behavioral outcome, performance, and examines their connections to career growth. The study verifies that organizational career growth can promote employees' job satisfaction and performance in the organization, suggesting that career growth can lead employees to generate a positive cognitive and affective evaluation of the organization and the job. Finally, in the theoretical article by Vande Griek et al. (2019), they propose a negative relationship between career growth and turnover intention as well as a positive relationship between career growth and performance. Based on that, Vande Griek and colleagues (2019) speculate that individual differences and behaviors that include proactivity, individual-initiated job crafting, and career stage may moderate these relationships.

Recommendations

Beyond the previous studies, the seven articles in this special issue have further addressed the five questions emphasized above to a certain extent, revealing current trends in research on career growth. We now know more about the causes and outcomes of career growth, from both the within-the-individual and between-individuals and within-the-organization and between-organizations perspectives. We also have a deeper understanding of how career growth works in different contexts.

However, this is just the beginning, and further research on career growth is needed. The coming of the new career era and the changes in the world of work have resulted in the need to update research on career growth. Moreover, the lack of a theoretical framework has further limited the research progress. We offer six recommendations to address these issues with the goal of stimulating major advances in future research. These recommendations come from a systematic review of existing studies on career growth, and the questions posed as a result of our synthesis of the articles in this issue.

Recommendation 1: Identify the Mechanisms Behind Career Growth—Toward a Perspective of Upward-Mobility System

The articles in this special issue further explore the causes of career growth with a particular emphasis on individual differences. However, the findings on why those factors influence career growth are limited. In other words, the question, "Why do some individuals experience more successful career mobility" needs further exploration. So far, only a few studies have attempted to answer the question through emphasizing person–job fit (Chen et al., 2015) and the effects of managerial perceptions on the relationships between employee behaviors and career growth (Weer & Greenhaus, 2019).

Given that career growth represents a form of upward movement in an organization, future research should examine the different roles of contested mobility and sponsored mobility (Ng et al., 2005; Turner, 1960) in determining one's career growth. According to the contested-mobility perspective, the basis for people to get ahead lies in their own abilities and contributions (Ng et al., 2005). This perspective focuses more on individuals' own efforts and abilities such as material possessions, mass popularity, and easily assessed skills (Turner, 1960). The sponsored-mobility perspective, on the other hand, views the established elite as an important determinant of individual upward mobility because they control the selection process (Turner, 1960). Thus, only the features, skills, and behaviors that are valued by the established elite can lead to employee career growth. Because an organization usually

has a dominant upward mobility system, either contested or sponsored, future research should examine how the nature of the upward mobility system employed by organizations influences the relevant importance of the factors determining organizational career growth.

Recommendation 2: Enrich the Theoretical Frameworks for Career Growth Outcomes

As mentioned above, the existing research on the outcomes of career growth has focused on turnover intentions, job satisfaction, commitment, voice behavior, and performance. To establish the relationships between career growth and these variables, researchers tend to use social exchange theory (Kwon & Cho, 2019; Wang et al., 2014), the theory of work adjustment (Spagnoli, 2019), and psychological attachment theory (Wang et al., 2014; Weng et al., 2010).

Future research on career growth outcomes would also benefit from the use of additional theoretical frameworks. One possibility, suggested by Kraimer et al. (2011), is to explore the motivational processes surrounding career growth. Kraimer and colleagues (2011) indicated that employees who perceive high levels of career opportunity might have greater motivation to work hard on behalf of the organization. As a result, future research could incorporate motivation variables into the research linking career growth to employees' behaviors. In addition, since previous research suggested that career growth can be conceived of as a job resource (Kwon & Cho, 2019; Lu et al., 2016), it would be worthwhile to develop a resource-related theoretical framework (e.g., conservation of resources theory) to investigate the effect of career growth on outcomes. We also encourage future research to establish theories for these relationships by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives.

Recommendation 3: Recognize the Distinct Impact of Career Growth's Dimensions

One gap raised by our findings concerns the distinctive roles of the different dimensions of organizational career growth. Prior studies suggest that the intrinsic (career goal progress and professional ability development) and extrinsic components (promotion speed and remuneration growth) of career growth play different roles in predicting outcomes (McElroy & Weng, 2016; Weng et al., 2010). This suggests future studies should examine the role of different components of career growth on employees' attitudes and behaviors. Deci et al. (1999) found that tangible rewards significantly undermine intrinsic motivation. Kochan (2002) also argued that money only results in temporary obedience from workers and could not transform workers' attitudes and behavior in the long term. Thus, we speculate that extrinsic career growth might have very different effects on individuals' behavior compared with intrinsic career growth. Specifically, when extrinsic career growth increases, the strength of its positive effect might decrease. It should be interesting to examine the distinctive roles of intrinsic and extrinsic career growth and to explore the curvilinear relationship between career growth and its outcomes.

Recommendation 4: Adopt a Context-Dependent Approach for Career Growth Research

The notion of careers involves individuals, organizations, and society, and, as a result, career growth must inevitably be influenced by the contexts in which it occurs. In this special issue, several articles analyzed career growth within different contexts, emphasizing the role of family, discussing women's career (Patton & Doherty, 2019), and systemizing the factors that influence the career development prospects of university research managers and administrators in small island states (Bonnici & Cassar, 2019).

Career growth research in the future should take a more context-dependent approach, that is, how career growth relationships are affected by the economic context, cultural background, job type, and so on. In particular, the factors relevant to narrow contexts (i.e., work context and nonwork context), such as organizational culture, organizational climate, leadership style, work–family balance, and family

structure, may work as antecedents or moderators of career growth. As for the broader context, future research should explore issues such as how social–economic changes influence career growth, and how career growth varies cross-culturally. For example, recent changes in the economy at both the national and global levels have led to a growing number of people to choose entrepreneurship as a career (Barnir et al., 2011). Career growth of self-employed individuals may resemble the contested upward mobility system discussed above and, therefore, be different from that of those individuals employed by an organization that relies more heavily on sponsored upward mobility. That is, their careers rely mostly on themselves in addition to the fact that they are more likely to face additional financial, managerial, and personal challenges (Zimmerer et al., 2007). In this case, the antecedents and outcomes of entrepreneur career growth are worth exploring in future research.

Recommendation 5: Examine the Nature of Careers Over Time via Career Stages and Longitudinal Research

A career is a long-lasting process involving “the combination and sequence of roles played by a person during the course of lifetime” (Super, 1980, p. 282). Career growth is an important part of this sequence of roles over one’s work life. Regarding this process, Super (1957, 1980) divided the concept of a career into five stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement. For each stage, we agree with Vande Griek et al. (2019) that the organizational career growth opportunities that people could receive may be different, which suggests that the role of career stage should be further explored in future research on career growth. Vande Griek et al. (2019) suggest one such possibility in positing that career stage may moderate the relationship between proactive personality and organizational career growth.

In addition, people may attach varying levels of importance to the subdimensions of career growth at different stages during their careers. For instance, individuals establishing a career may care more about remuneration because they have to rely on it for a living, while individuals in the maintenance stage may value professional ability development more as it meets their desire to gain higher achievements. The use of longitudinal studies in future research will enable researchers to determine whether there is a changing trajectory of one’s emphasis on different career growth dimensions over the five stages of one’s career and how that trajectory affects people’s attitudes and behaviors.

Recommendation 6: Incorporate the Features of New Career Era Into Career Growth Research

Empirical research has supported the idea that career growth can bring about positive outcomes to both individuals and organizations, but with the coming of a new career era, the effect of it on organizations and individuals needs further exploration. People in the new career era tend to follow their personal career goals and manage careers on their own instead of relying on the organization (Hall, 2004), which makes contemporary careers less predictable and leaves organizations to face more challenges and risks in career management (Clarke, 2013; Hamori et al., 2011). Today, there is a controversy about whether the organizations’ investment in employee careers is still necessary (De Vos & Cambré, 2017). Since career growth is a joint effort of individuals and organizations, the uncertainty regarding an organization’s investment questions the extent to which career growth actually benefits organizations and individuals in the new career era. We suggest that future research should incorporate new career era concepts such as protean career orientation, career planning, boundaryless mindset, and career self-management into account when analyzing the positive effects of career growth on organizations and individuals. Doing so will enable us to gain insight into the situations where career growth is more/less effective in benefiting individuals and organizations.

Finally, the new ideas being introduced into research on career management and career dynamics such as boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), protean career (Hall, 2004), postcorporate career (Peiperl & Baruch, 1997), and kaleidoscope career (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) should also be incorporated into future research on career growth. In spite of the progress made to date and, in particular, the innovative works presented in this special issue, much more work needs to be done. We hope that these articles and the questions raised here help stimulate additional research on these issues.


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