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The Role of Strengths in Managing Midlife Career Transition for Corporate Professionals

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Description

Trends within midlife professionals suggest individuals are increasingly seeking opportunities for career transitions, and are often searching for careers that are more intrinsically motivated, individually meaningful and self-congruent. However, developmental transitions are by their very nature stressful. This research seeks to understand how corporate professionals between the ages of 35-54 successfully manage midlife career transition amidst the stress and anxiety associated with that transition. The traditional approach to career transition is based on a competence framework either focusing on retraining or applying transferrable skills. This approach might not be most appropriate for corporate professionals over the age of 35. A strength-based approach is therefore being proposed in this paper as an alternative approach. Phenomenological research involving six professionals between the ages of 35-54 who have gone through the midlife career transition will be utilised to identify common experiences, and investigate what role strengths may play in managing ones career transition.

Location

iC - SBS Teaching Facility

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Paper Submission for HDR Conference 2011

The role of strengths in managing midlife career transition for corporate professionals

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Trends within midlife professionals suggest individuals are increasingly seeking opportunities for career transitions, and are often searching for careers that are more intrinsically motivated, individually meaningful and self-congruent. However, developmental transitions are by their very nature stressful. This research seeks to understand how corporate professionals between the ages of 35-54 successfully manage midlife career transition amidst the stress and anxiety associated with that transition. The traditional approach to career transition is based on a competence framework either focusing on retraining or applying transferrable skills. This approach might not be most appropriate for corporate professionals over the age of 35. A strength-based approach is therefore being proposed in this paper as an alternative approach. Phenomenological research involving six professionals between the ages of 35-54 who have gone through the midlife career transition will be utilised to identify common experiences, and investigate what role strengths may play in managing ones career transition.

Introduction

In Australia, approximately 36% of employed persons are between the ages of 35-54 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004). Many of these individuals are going through a critical life transition period. Longitude studies (Levionson et al. 1978, Stewart & Vandewater 1999) show that many men and women at midlife feel the need to conduct midlife reviews.

Trends within midlife professionals suggest individuals are increasingly seeking opportunities for career transitions (Slay, Taylor & Williamson 2004) and are often searching for careers that are more intrinsically motivated, individually meaningful and self-congruent. Case studies have shown that the individuals who are able to manage the career transition successfully, over the period of crisis there is a clear shift away from an extrinsic orientation towards intrinsically motivated activities, and become a more integrated and authentic self (Fitzgerald 2002, Robinson & Smith 2010). There is also considerable evidence in the data that people use midlife transition as a tool for constructing meaning in their lives (Wethington 2000).

However, developmental transitions are by their very nature stressful (Levinson 1986). Jung (1971) identified midlife transition as a period of reawakening which shifting the focus from the ego to the inner core of the self. This produces a feeling of anxiety that forces a person out onto new paths. According to Levinson and his colleagues (1978), the Mid-life Transition is a time of moderate or severe crisis. At same time, career transitions often have profound impacts on a professional's physical health and psychological wellbeing (Miller 2007).

Therefore, my primary research question is: How do individuals successfully manage midlife career transition in the contemporary world?

Midlife

There are many different ways to conceptualize what happens at midlife. The definition of midlife can be described as the chronological age of a person who usually falls somewhere between the ages of 35-60 years old (Hollis 2005, Jung 1971, Levionson et al. 1978).

Midlife can also be defined as a developmental process that an individual will go through during the life span – a period of reflection and re-evaluation of every aspect of their lives (Erickson 1963, Jung 1971, Levionson et al. 1978). The quest is to find inner meaning within oneself and finding a career that would bring purpose, joy, spirituality and awakening in the second part of life (Bahr 2009, Hollis 2005, Jung 1971). From Levinson's perspective, problems occur at the midlife transition when a person around the age of 40 perceives that personal growth has been stalled. As a result, Levinson and his colleagues found that individuals conduct a "midlife review" as one seeks to modify their current career path or their perceptions of the path (Levinson et al. 1978) in an attempt to allow free expression of suppressed talents, desires, and values.

Career transition

A career transition is defined as "the period during which an individual is either changing roles (objective) or changing orientation to a role (subjective)" (Louis 1980, p. 330). According to Louis, subjective career transitions are determined by changes in an individual's attitudes toward or perceptions of their career. In this research, I focus on examining the experiences of subjective career transitions.

Competency-based approach vs. Strength-based approach

The traditional approach to career transition is based on competence framework - focuses on retraining (Hall 1995) or applying transferrable skills (Linley, Biswas-Diener & Trenier 2011). However, Hall and Mirvis (1995) suggest that after years of psychological success based on a certain set of job skills, to be told that new skills must be developed is a tremendous blow to one's confidence. Studies have shown that Self-confidence[1] is critical to career success (Betz 1992, Hollenbeck & Hall 2004), embarking on a new career (Whitmarsh, Brown & Cooper 2007), and successful career transition (Liu 2008).

On the other hand, Linley et al. (2011) cautions that if the existing transferrable skills are regular learned behaviours, then it can present a psychological trap of which we need to be aware, because the critical authentic and energizing component is missing. Research shows that behaving authentically is fundamental to psychological growth and wellbeing (Govindji & Linley 2007).

An alternative approach could focus on discovering and applying ones strengths. Positive psychology research has shown that strength use offers a reliable avenue for pursuing self-concordant goals that lead to greater wellbeing and goal attainment (Linley et al. 2010). According to Linley (2008), strength is a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance (Linley 2008, p.9). In other words, strength in Linley's definition represents an intersection of competence (i.e. what we are good at) and interest (i.e. what we love). According to Deci and Ryan (1985), interest plays an important directive role in intrinsically motivated behaviour in that people naturally approach activities that interest them.

Linley and his colleagues (2011) observe from their outplacement coaching that starting with strengths, clients are enabled to identify and focus on what really matters to them, what they enjoy doing, and how they want to spend their working time in the future – all of which are valuable bedrock data for underpinning their future career search and aspirations. Similarly, Shepard (1984) suggests that an individual is drawn to enact his career using abilities that represent his 'genius'. Therefore, an individual will pursue goals and task efforts that use his greatest strengths, and his self-confidence with respect to any given task is likely to be

[1] Following Hall and Chandler's work (2005), I use the term 'self-confidence' synonymously with that Bandura (1997) calls 'self-efficacy' because this is the way individuals describe the experience in their interviews.

bolstered (Hall & Chandler 2005).

Literature Gap

Although midlife transitions may have important implications, there is little research examining midlife career decision-making (Greller & Stroh 1995, Hall 1986). Furthermore, there has been limited empirical research on causes of midlife career transition, the process of career transition itself, or how individuals manage midlife career transition (Brown 2002, Motulsky 2005).

Furthermore, despite strength approach has been linked positively with wellbeing, goal attainment, productivity, life satisfaction and happiness, there is no empirical research on the effectiveness of strength use in managing one's midlife career transition.

Design and Methodology

The sample includes 6 professionals between the ages of 35-54 who have gone through the midlife career transition. Semi-structured phenomenological interviews will be conducted and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis framework will be used for data analysis (Smith & Osborn 2003). A phenomenological research design is chosen because it provides a rigorous approach to qualitative research and examines the meaning of experiences for individuals in the real world. Researcher will attempt to take an 'insider's perspective' in order to get close to the participant's personal world. The discussion will then examine any role strengths played in these descriptions.

Implication

Studies show that people who have managed midlife transition crisis successfully can come out of crisis with a new sense of self-awareness and a higher-level of harmony and job satisfaction (Fitzgerald 2002, Robinson & Smith 2010). People have developed other interests, knowledge bases, and skills, they will have greater self-confidence and feel less paranoia, and the organization will be more productive (Strenger & Ruttenberg 2008). Therefore, this research can play an important role in improving the wellbeing and productivity for both the individuals and organisations.

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