Career Success in the MIS Academy

Completed Research

Karma Sherif  
Qatar University  
ksherif@qu.edu.qa

Ning Nan  
University of British Columbia  
ning.nan@sauder.ubc.ca

Abstract

Like other academicians, MIS researchers have boundary-less careers that rely more on personal drive than affiliated institution to develop career competencies and achieve career success. Unlike other fields, maintaining career success in the MIS academic community requires frequent update to the research themes to maintain relevance to the professional and academic community. As such, adapting expertise and building social relationships is instrumental for career success. In this study, we explore how faculty who “know why”, “know how” and “know with whom” are successful in advancing their careers; while faculty who do not master these three competencies have limited success and impose social closure on themselves and are incapable of exploiting resources to their advantage. Based on the findings, we advance a number of theoretical propositions to guide future research on the effect of the three types of knowing on academic careers.

Keywords

Academic career success, Boundary-less Careers, Intelligent Careers, Qualitative Research.

Introduction

Boundary-less careers are careers where the hiring organization plays a less important role in defining career success. Personal drive, on the other hand, has a more significant impact on career pattern. An organization hierarchical position or attained promotions are no longer estimates of career success (Littler, Weisner, & Dunford 2003). As boundaryless careers, academic career progression is not tied to a single institution and academic commitment is to the profession (De Janasz & Sullivan 2004, Bekhradnia & Sastry, 2005). In fact, academics perceive mobility as a significant enabler of career success (Bedeian, Cavazos, Hunt, & Jauch 2010) as it widens social networks and helps in gaining professional recognition. As such career success requires taking ownership of one own career and planning a trajectory that guarantee success beyond the institution. Knowledge, skill and reputation are important success factors for boundaryless careers (Loacker & Liwa, 2016). The Intelligent Career Framework focuses on three main pillars “knowing why”, “knowing how”, and “knowing with whom” (Arthur et al. 1994, Parker et al. 2009). In academia: 1) knowledge of the culture of the academy and the ability to identify with it and adapt to its expectations and values (Parker and Arthur 2015); 2) knowledge, and expertise in what the community considers valuable (Arthur, Khapova, & Richardson 2017); and 3) knowledge of how to develop an instrumental social network (DeFillippi and Arthur 1994) are important competencies for career success.

Given the dearth of knowledge on career success of MIS professionals in general, and faculty in particular, we do not have an understanding of how junior faculty can establish career success in the MIS academic community, without being limited to an institution. In this research, we focus on identifying the most salient factors that contribute to career success in academia in general and the MIS field in particular. We are specifically set to answer the following research questions: 1) what factors are important for the MIS career development. 2) How do these factors interact to positively impact faculty careers? 3) why do some faculty are more capable of maintaining their career successes than others? In this study, we contribute to literature on career success in the MIS profession by conducting a field study of 36 faculty in different institutions to examine the applicability of the intelligent career framework to the MIS academy and the importance of “the three ways of knowing” and the interaction between them (Arthur et al. 2017) for MIS academics.
Literature Review

Career success is defined as “the accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person’s work experiences over time (Arthur et al. 2005, p.179). Career success research stresses the importance of examining the duality of the subjective and objective sides of the career and the interdependence between them. Subjective career success depend on a person’s own evaluation of his or her career against criteria that they believe are important. Objective career success, on the other hand, manipulate tangible measures that are well accepted within and outside the employing organization. While the career literature has a long history of examining objective career success in terms of advancements within an organization (e.g., salary, positions, or promotions), presumably due to the prominence of hierarchies in the traditional employment context (Hall, 2002; Heslin, 2005), in recent years, more and more researchers have become discontented with this narrow focus of the career success conceptualization and called for incorporating both objective and subjective career success and the interdependence between them (Arthur et al., 2005).

The intelligent career framework (Arthur et al. 1994) provides directions for actualizing career success through investing in skills, experience, and relationships while adapting achievements to the expectations of the greater work community beyond a single employer (Parker et al. 2009). Three types of knowing are the central tenets of the framework: “‘knowing why”, “knowing how”, and “knowing with whom.”

The “Know why” reflects an individual investment in clearly articulating “why do you work?” Individuals differ in this competency based on their motivation, their identity, and their adaptation to the culture of the work community they identify with. “Know How” characterizes the “monopolization of socially valued knowledge” Kanter (1989) that is scarce and timely (Parker et al. 2009). Investments in the “know how” contribute to the professional advancement of the field (Judge et. al., 2004), which causes members of a community to recognize the relative and marginal value of the expertise (Bunderson, 2003). “Know with whom” requires the formulation of a relational strategy that identifies “who you know” and “what they can do for you” (Merton 1973) to fulfill instrumental objectives. The career literature stresses the importance of social relationships as valuable venues for acquiring information, cooperation, and career development functions (Brass, 1992; Burt, 1992; Seibert et. al., 2001). While the three types of knowing highlight important success factors, the interaction between them is key for determining success. For example, Individuals who has expertise (know how) are likely to have a network that extend beyond their required job related interactions and immediate organizations (Brass, 1984). Their success will facilitate the attraction of peers, superiors, and the “dominant coalition” of the bigger professional network (know with whom). Lack of expertise, on the other hand, restrict the ability to build relationships especially with successful individuals because of the cognitive dissonance and how individuals with low achievements perceive themselves and how they measure up to individuals with higher status. Similarly, building an instrumental network (knowing with whom) only generates value if the career actor is able to capitalize on social resources by “accurately discerning, weighting, and incorporating the task-relevant knowledge of [others]” (Thomas-Hunt et. al., 2003). For example, a doctoral student can gain access to career developmental advice and support from a senior faculty via an advice relationship. This doctoral student’s ability to apply the advice and support to his or her career development actions determines the career achievement resulted from these social resources.

The research context of this study, the MIS academic community, offers an ideal opportunity to explore career success in terms of skills and behaviors valued by peer group or work-related communities. Individuals in the professional career arena can keep the same rank for a long period of time while they become more recognized for their advancement of the domain knowledge. Albeit, the attainment of these recognitions do not necessarily lead to an increase in pay, promotions, or rank (Heslin, 2005). To our knowledge, this study is the first to cover the MIS academic community. While Beigi et al. (2018) examined the effect of the three types of knowledge on career success in academia and confirmed the bidirectional links between the three types of knowledge, several differences exist for our study. First, Beigi et al.(2018) focused on distinguished academics only, in this study we chose to examine a stratified sample with different levels of competencies and experiencing different levels of career success to provide a process model for junior faculty to guide them throughout their career trajectory. Second, Beigi et al.(2018) sample was homologous, our sample showed variation within each strata allowing us to provide customizable
recommendations based on a faculty’s inclination. Our study also highlights the importance of assuming community leadership roles (knowing for who) as an important mediator for career success in academia.

Methodology

Participants

We interviewed a sample of 36 MIS researchers from 22 institutions in the United States, Australia and Canada. All but two sampled institutions are doctorate-granting research institutions. Thirty percent of the participants were female, seventy were male. Forty percent were full professors, twenty five percent were associate professors, and thirty one percent were assistant professors. Candidate participants were initially identified using the major journal publications, websites of national and international Information systems conferences, the Association for Information Systems (AIS) faculty directory and interpersonal referrals. To ensure sufficient variations in the research participants’ career success, we selected the participants who were high, medium and low in objective career success. Table 1 presents the categorization of our sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stratification of Faculty</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full professor</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Stratification of Faculty on Objective Career

Data Collection

One of the coauthors conducted semi-structured interviews with the 36 participants with each interview lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. Open-ended questions were employed in order to collect data regarding the participants’ career experiences. Grounded in our conceptual definition of boundaryless career success and intelligent careers, the questions revolved around the participant’s perception of career success; their own satisfaction with their research productivity; and their social relationships with other researchers in the MIS community (within and outside their institutions). These questions allowed us to capture how the participants identify and associate themselves with the larger MIS community and their perception of the role social relationships play in actualizing subjective career success. Among the 36 interviews, 34 were taped and two were scribed. Transcriptions of these interviews yielded more than 400 pages of rich, detailed qualitative data.

Each participant’s “know how” (i.e., his/her contribution to the MIS research literature) was measured by the number of top-tier publications and the number of citations. Since these measures lend themselves naturally to objective data, we relied on the curriculum vitae of the participants, the Web of Science database of citations, as data sources of participants’ objective career success.

Data Analysis

We employed the qualitative approach in this study. The open coding method (Corbin and Strauss 1990) was followed to allow categories to emerge from the data via an iterative and multiple-step interpretation process. First, we identified statements related to “subjective career success”, “know why”, “know how” and
“know with who” from the interview transcripts. Next, one of the coauthors performed the first-round coding of instances of the identified and emerging categories (see Table 2 for the set of categories). An independent second coder, who was trained in content analysis but uninformed of the research questions, also coded the data. This coder was provided a description of the categories and cues of how to categorize the statements (Table 2). The inter-rater reliability for the two coders was 81%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Top-tier pubs</th>
<th>Citations</th>
<th>Leadership Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Σ</td>
<td>Υ</td>
<td>Σ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>11.33</td>
<td>11497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Objective Career Success

Findings

In this section we will discuss the emergent constructs that surfaced under each of the major categories. Along with excerpts from the interviews transcription.

**Subjective Career Success**

Subjective career success showed the same pattern as the objective measures where personal satisfaction dwindled as we move from high to low. Faculty in the middle were aware of their average status in the community but compensate that by taking on leadership positions. Faculty who experienced high objective career success expressed satisfaction with their achievement and a self-confidence in their contribution to the MIS academic community. They have built a reputation of being competent, highly engaged in their research, and dedicated to conducting rigorous research studies. As we moved down the ladder, we noticed demotion of self-confidence and an aspiration to achieve success mainly through social contacts.

> I kind of counted on [my contacts] and it didn’t workout...When you rely on interpersonal relationships, often times you can be disappointed. I expected our friendship to have a positive influence on the research and in fact it was more like “well since we have a personal relationship, I’m sure you’ll understand that I can’t work with you.” That’s kind of how it worked out.

**Know why**

It was evident that faculty who experience high objective career success saw their main role as the creation of knowledge

> “My role is to really look at the big picture and working on important things to get underneath the explicit knowledge and dig deeper into what's there and ask the right questions and explore; to be able to interact with others and to be intellectually stimulated to create new knowledge with a great degree of originality ...I am confident if there is intellectual stimulation that would result in an innovative output in the end.”

Whereas faculty with low objective career success were more tied to their institution and the roles they played within. They saw balancing between family and work as more important than achieving community recognition for their expertise. Faculty in the middle defined success mainly through their citizenship behavior within the community and chose to work for institutions that value their service.

> At my university, community service counts pretty heavily, to be well known within your discipline and your community was important. It is fairly nontraditional, I might not be that well known for all the publications, but I am well known in the community for the support
Know How

Several strategies helped successful faculty show competency in the “know how.” Focusing on “important research questions rather than just on publishing”; “seeing the big picture”; “following a rigorous research method;” and building externalities.

"It all depends on the externalities I'll get, how I will leverage existing projects, or will result in a stream of research. How will I tie it to other things I am involved in and how the knowledge increase the intellectual capacity.”

Faculty with low objective career success tend to be opportunistic and embark on research projects that would satisfy their institutional responsibilities. They underscore the roles they play within their institution like “Ph.D. Advisor;” or “MBA Coordinator”

With PhD students I'm beginning to devote less of my effort to try and help them because it doesn't seem to be doing a whole lot of good... I was hoping he would write some papers with me that sort of thing... But now that he is leaving, I'm not as inclined to spend time with him to do that any more.

Know with whom

Successful faculty possession of valued expertise provides a sense of control over the relationships they establish and the roles they play to promote research objectives and career status within the community

"I seek to establish [relationships] with people who are interested in getting things done... people who are fun to work with ... and like sharing the load of the task, as opposed to someone who is going to be very dependent. I don't like that. People who are very open to trying new and different things - I think that's important to me - doing new and inventive things that haven't been done before... The most important thing is people that are going to get things done... If they don't get thing done, I stop working with them. You know I can't shoulder 90% of the work for like a two-person project. It's never 50-50, but there has to be an appropriate amount of reciprocity to make it worthwhile.

Your reputation influences things in your favor...[A contact] is really one of the top people in service Marketing. I met him at a conference and he expressed an interest in working with me. He knew a lot about service marketing, more than I knew, and also he's a real strong scholar. So, I've often worked with very capable people. I can learn from them and they can add goals to a project that I don't have.

I started collaborating more with faculty who are seeking my potential consulting... I provided feedback on a paper for a guy in Korea and he asked if I would be interested in being a co-author. He sent me another version of the paper and I sent him more comments and made some changes and I ended up as a co-author. Though I have a lot of projects going on and I have a hard enough time keeping up with the ones I have going on, the person I'm interacting with is heavily engaged in the process. I'm trying to learn how to work that way more, where I'm providing feedback and advice and contribution as opposed to being the driver of the project.

Average faculty though they have established relationships with influential contacts in the field, they do not collaborate with them.

"Collaborations sort of have centered around my research; I'm sort of the wheel with spokes going out"
Though we have the same research interests, they tend to study different phenomena. I trust them and feel obliged to return favors to them because they show personal interest in my career. They open the door to a mentoring relationship. But none of these three more senior people have approached me to either collaborate with them, and neither did I.

Faculty with limited objective career success are even fearful of collaborating with successful contacts.

*It is quite easy for them to take an idea and spin off a paper or spin off an output very quickly, given they've got the experience... So you don't share with those to protect your ownership of some idea, or paper."

They express disappointment in the outcome of several collaborations that do not result in the expected outcome

*they often have good intentions but then the project doesn't get done, or they have high hopes that something will be a contribution but later it never gets published.*

**Summary**

Taken together the qualitative findings regarding the participants’ three types of knowing complement the quantitative findings in revealing fine-grained patterns of their competencies and skills in the academic career arena. In general, successful faculty can be characterized as “positive” and “diverse”. They deliberately manage their careers and social relationships to achieve their goals. Average faculty are “selective” and “service-driven”. They seek to gain success through their service activities. The low achieving faculty can be described as “self-confined” and “locally-focused”. They are largely driven by their institutional positions. This limits their career development resources and compromises their research activities.

**Toward a Theory of Career Success in Academia**

When comparing and analyzing the research findings across the three strata of participants, we recognize several consistent themes that speak to our research inquiry regarding how different competencies affect career success in an academic community and why some faculty are far superior in securing instrumental social resources than others.

First, the participants’ interview comments make it clear that they understand the implications of their competencies on their ability exercise a strong sense of freedom and control in diversifying their research activities and roles. Although they did not explicitly attribute this freedom and control to their highly competencies, their assertive tone in the interviews implies their awareness of the advantage. Interview comments of faculty with low objective career success convey an obvious lack of confidence and control in managing their career development. Several of them explicitly attribute their self-confined research activities to their lack of competencies. These observations lead to the proposition below:

P1: a faculty member’s career success will vary depending on his/her Know.

The second theme surfacing from our interview data is the role of social relationships as conduits for career success. All participants indicate that they receive important resources from their contacts. The content of these resources usually varies with the characteristics of faculty. For example, successful faculty recount stories on how they acquire new knowledge from their students and other researchers within and outside their institutions. Average achievers report incidences when they receive personal advice from their friends in the community. The low gain of social resources is usually limited by their self-constrained social relationships.

P2: a faculty member’s social relationships shape his/her gain of social resources.

A third recurrent theme in the participants’ interview statements is the importance of “what contacts can do for you” in facilitating social mobility to higher social status. The high and average achievers report positive experiences related to access to instrumental social resources that, over time, translate into higher academic status. The low achievers admit the negative impact of a lack of social resources on their career.
development and thus focus on gaining instant credit that lack the long term effect on their status within the academic community.

P3: a faculty member's gain (or loss) of social resources influence his/her social status.

While testing these propositions is beyond the scope of this study, we collected data on the participants' objective career success three years after the initial data collection in order to gain some initial insights into these propositions. The participants' status trajectories over the three years are generally reflective of our propositions. The causal pathways among knowledge competencies, career success, social relationships and social resources (i.e., P1, P2, and P3) form a reinforcing feedback loop, which serves to sustain the social status of the participants. Consistent with this theoretical view there is only four cases of downward status change in the high performers stratum and one case of upward movement in the low performers stratum. One Reason for the downward mobility is continued research focus on a technology that elapsed and homophilic networks that limit access to variations in scholarly-thinking and new ideas on emerging trends in technology. Accordingly, some high performers faced difficulty publishing in top-tier journals and experienced decline in research productivity and erosion of their high status.

Implications for Research

Our study's overall implication for research is that rich and sophisticated research models should be developed and applied in examining the complex causal linkages among competencies, career success, and social resources in academia. The propositions inferred from our data analysis merit future theoretical or empirical investigations taking into account the dynamic feedback loops among these three constructs (i.e., P1 – P3). Below we offer several specific implications for future research seeking to revise, expand, or test these propositions.

First, an examination of the feedback loops requires researchers to transcend a static view of these constructs. Researchers need to trace the evolving patterns of career success and identify those patterns regularly associating with particular career trajectories of professionals. This requires longitudinal observations and analytical approaches explicitly taking time into account. Potential findings from this future line of research can significantly enhance our understanding of the sustainable pathways to long-term superior social status.

Second, future research can seek to identify the most salient set of individual differences as the contingency factors in the causal linkages among competencies, career success and social. Our interview data suggest that research interests, career goals, and personality are among the important individual differences in the academic career arena. It would be interesting to see whether a different set of individual attributes play more important roles in academic arenas.

Implications for Practice

For faculty valuing expertise and community-level achievements, this study provides career development guidance. First, career development should be managed as processes rather than steady-state conditions. A notion emerging from our interview and the post-hoc analysis is that knowledge competencies require ongoing efforts to build and maintain. Faculty should constantly monitor their expertise and question “why I work” and deliberately harvest their positive impacts on career development.

Second, faculty need to first understand their own preferences, strengths, and weakness in order to effectively manage their interpersonal behaviors. They should seek to complement their interpersonal behaviors with their individual characteristics. Third, while popular wisdom of career development never fails to mention the importance of social relationships and social resources, these behaviors alone do not guarantee success. Faculty needs to develop competence valued by their academic communities in order to effectively deploy social resources gained via social relationships in achieving career advancement. Our interview data suggest that social relationships and social resources do not substitute individual competence; instead, they enhance the positive effects of each other.
Limitations of the study

Although the interview data allows us to surface rich insights regarding the role of competencies in shaping career success, they do not lend themselves naturally to regression models. Future research can empirically verify the propositions inferred from this study by collecting a large sample of data from different academic communities. This future research should seek to move beyond simple associations and investigate the directional causal linkages between competencies, social resources, and career success, as well as the contingency effects of individual differences.

A second limitation of this study is the use of community-valued achievements and research productivity as dimensions of career success. Future research can employ a broader range of dimensions and fully capture the variations in career success through rank, salary, and individual perception.

Conclusion

This study shed some fresh light on the effect of competencies on developing social relationships and acquiring instrumental resources for career development in academia. The study moves beyond correlations and tap into the rich social experiences of faculty. Our interview data extend prior research by implying the existence of feedback loops in the association between competencies social relationships, social resources, and social status. The research highlights the role of social status in maintaining categories of faculty systematically privileged in accessing instrumental social resources that guarantee career success. We demonstrated that structural characteristics of faculty affect the formation of social associations and explain inequality in accessing social resources. It is our hope that researchers and professionals can learn and grow in their career arenas via informed management of their careers.

REFERENCES


