

The Process of Becoming a Top Worker

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to study the phenomenon of success at work: of which elements success is constructed and what factors define the process of becoming a top worker in Finland. As an example of the top workers, “Employees of the Year” (N=8) from different occupational fields were chosen to represent the successful workers. This article discusses how employees’ of the year careers can be described and what kinds of factors have influenced their success at work? Based on the results, the phenomenon of success at work is contemplated from a positive point of view focusing on wellbeing at work and beyond. It discussed how these results can be used in education and can an educator provide as many students as possible with the experience of finding their own way and expressing their own personal characters

Keywords: Success at work, Work drive, Work motivation, Positive psychology, Narrative research

1. Introduction

Today’s working life poses continuous efficiency and development pressures to all workers regardless of the occupation. Therefore, surviving in the riptide of modern working life has become demanding, not to mention succeeding in it. On the other hand, employees’ personality and moral valuations increasingly have a strong effect (Vähämäki, 2007) even to the extent that it has already been stated that the admiring of social skills has gone almost too far in today’s working life (e.g. Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2010). This article has a positive starting point: instead of focusing on all the problems and stress-factors of today’s working life this research concentrates on the positive sides of work and success. (Almost & Spence Laschinger, 2002; Spence Laschinger, Finegan, Shamian, & Wilk 2004.)

Experience has already shown that the healthier and more satisfied the employees are the better they work (Rissa, 2007). Positive feelings support problem-solving skills and the ability to act in an innovative way. The importance and potential of this may seem surprising as the feelings of happiness are so simple and common in nature (Isen, 2006). Because success is reflected from the positive perspective in this research, it is relevant to introduce some key concepts that, for their part, can explain the phenomenon of success at work.

Success at work can be considered as the fullest expression of mastery (Krueger, 1990.) On the other hand, everyone does not have the goal of success at work of a similar kind but a variety of motivating factors can be recognized. One may aim at earning a living, the other one’s goal may be to achieve top-expertise in his/her professional field, to enhance the quality of life, or to strive for a personally significant, long-term goal (Locke, 2002) – not to mention that success is experienced subjectively and the personal achievements are evaluated in different ways. (Maddux, 2002). In this article, we define “success at work” to relate to the personal feelings of expertise (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2005), competence (White, 1959; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2005), and accomplishment (Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997; Latham & Pinder, 2005).

The purpose of this article is to introduce the positive sides of work: how you can not only manage your work life

but also succeed. In addition, there is a need for qualitative research that surveys human experiences, although this introduces a methodological challenge; namely, how experiences could be examined without categorizing them into some predetermined categories (Mahoney, 2002)? The process of becoming recognized as a top worker is of course epitomized and illustrated by Employees of the Year awards (see Uusiautti, 2008).

2. Positive Psychology and Success at Work

Interest in themes such as wellbeing, happiness, quality of life, and positive feelings is germane to positive psychology, a field that has offered studies into the positive characteristics, feelings and strengths of individuals and has also sought to identify the nature of institutions that promote and enhance such positive attributes (Seligman et al., 2005; Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2006). Gable and Haidt (2005) briefly define positive psychology in the following terms: “Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, 104). The aim of positive psychology is to study the reasons why people feel joy, show altruism, and create healthy families and institutions. This focus has been criticized because it concentrates on exploring normal and healthy activities instead of helping dysfunctional people with a variety of problems. On the other hand, perhaps focusing on problems has taken attention away from studying why the majority of people are actually psychologically, physically, and socially healthy—or happy, so to say (Gable & Haidt, 2005)! From this point of view, a study concerning successful workers would seem to be of valuable contribution.

The latest studies on work life have paid attention to overburdening working conditions: negative concepts like stress, burnout, and lassitude are the most common descriptors in work-related research — all factors that are less than surprising in the present economic situation. It is true that fast changes in work life and demands of efficiency tend to put employees in stressful situations. On the other hand, the image of work life becomes unilateral if we focus only on the problems and drawbacks of work (Mäkikangas, 2007).

The research on the life-span has also contributed to the systematical research on accomplishments and success (Duffy & Dik, 2009; Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2006). However, it is worth discussing how adaptable the theories about development phases (e.g., cf. Erikson, 1994), actually are nowadays because the constant adjusting to the new circumstances and coping are emphasized in these days and the course of life is not as carefully pre-determined and stable as it was before (Baltes & Freund, 2006).

Thus, the research on happiness has also taken root increasingly: in order to know why some people are happier—regardless of the setbacks—than others, we have to understand what the cognitive and motivational processes are that maintain and even increase the happiness and positive attitude (Lyubomirsky, 2001). If the success at work is dissected from a positive perspective, this view is also of great interest.

Positive feelings support problem-solving skills and the ability to act in an innovative way. The full importance and potential of this may seem surprising as the emotion of happiness is so simple and common in nature (Isen, 2006). Positive psychology is also interested in whether the life spans of positively behaving people differ from those of others. And if they do, what factors play a key role during the life spans of strong and optimistic people, and how could these factors be recognized? These questions are essential when researching the experiences of employees of the year and asking them to identify the factors that have contributed to their career success. The individual differences are traditionally characterized by the achieved results instead of paying attention to the processes he/she takes part (see e.g. Feldt et al., 2005): the process of becoming a top worker seems extremely interesting when considering from this point of view.

At the subjective level, positive psychology concentrates on subjective experiences, wellbeing, satisfaction, flow, joy, pleasure, and happiness, as well as on optimistic and hopeful attitude and confidence in the future. At the group level, the interest is on the civil skills and institutions that make the individuals turn into better citizens—responsible, flexible, and ethical workers. (Seligman, 2002.)

Other concepts can also explain success at work. Motivation can be considered the most salient factor in every theory attempting to predict and explain behavior and performance (Mitchell, 1997). Similarly, motivation can be explained by several various factors: especially the contextual matters have been on focus (Latham & Pinder, 2005). Actually, it is easy to name many different and obvious reasons why people work in the first place: to earn a living, it activates and stimulates, provides social contacts, and is rewarding (Furnham, 1992). Nevertheless, these things do not tell about the motivation that leads to actual success. The intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2000b) refers to an individual's need for learning new skills and developing towards greater sovereignty, autonomy, and capacity. It comprises the individual's personality structure and motivation. The extrinsic control, rewards, or punishments are not significant to an intrinsically motivated employee: working is self-purposeful.

Positive concepts that describe wellbeing at work are also relevant to highlight when discussing the positive basis for success at work. Such concepts are, for example, the work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Hakanen, Perhoniemi, & Toppinen-Tanner, 2008), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001), and joy of work (Varila & Lehtosaari, 2001).

3. Method

3.1 The Data and Procedure

The original research used a mixed-method approach (see, e.g., Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003; Creswell, 2002). The second phase, on which this article concentrates, was a narrative study and the data were collected by qualitative interviews in 2007. In the interviews, the participants were asked to review their process of becoming a top worker. Employees of the year that were interviewed ($n = 8$) were nominated between the years 2005 and 2006 (nurse of the year, farmer of the year, police officer of the year ($n=2$), psychologist of the year, priest of the year ($n=2$), and artisan of the year). Six of them were men, and two were women. Participants were between 36 and 64 years old (mean = 49). In the interviews, the participants were asked to discuss the following themes: factors that enhance success, difficulties and obstacles that they had confronted, and choices and decisions they had made during the course of their lives.

Narrative research can be defined as research that utilises or analyses data that is collected via narratives (e.g. biographies) or other such ways (e.g. anthropologists' observational narratives). Thus, a narrative can be either a research object or a means to study a phenomenon (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Narrative research does not focus on objective and generalised facts but on local, personal, and subjective information—this is considered a strength of narrative research because informants' voices can be heard authentically (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Narratives can also be used when analysing the reasons for actions. In this research, the narrative interview was complemented with characteristics of the theme interview to best serve this research, aiming at thick description of the phenomenon of success at work (see Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes the analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. The former means categorising, for example by types, and metaphors. The latter refers to the composition of a new narrative based on various original narratives. Both of these analysis methods were used in this research: on the one hand, the participants' narratives were categorised by predetermined categories, and on the other hand, a narrative of becoming a top worker was composed.

In this research, an analysis of narratives and narrative analyses were made from the narratives that the participants told in the interviews. In this research, the analysis was made using narrative structuring that tries to put together a cohesive narrative of experiences and events during interviews (Kvale, 1997). Furthermore, the analysis typified a category-content-focused approach, with parts of narratives being placed in different categories (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998).

3.2 The Research Questions

This article concentrates on the following questions:

1) How can employees' of the year careers be described?

Two sub-questions are set to the main question:

1.1) What kind of enhancing factors did the rewarded employees of the year consider the most important in their careers?

1. 2) What kind of obstacles and misjudgments did they consider the most important in their careers?

3.3 Limitations of the Research

When evaluating the reliability of the research, there are a few issues that should be considered. One limitation in this research was the low number of participants. One reason for that certainly is that in Finland that is a country of 5 million people, the target group (employees of the year) is not quite big either. Nonetheless, regardless of the low number of participants, the interviews went well and were open and thorough and thus considered valuable.

In this research, participants presented top workers from different occupations. Each of them was nominated as "Employee of the Year" by Finnish labour unions, as most Finnish workers are members of a labour union in their own field. These top workers were considered representatives of successful workers and suitable informants for describing their experiences of success at work. Choosing the successful employees was not done by the researchers, ensuring that there was public justification for selecting the participants.

It was interesting to note that the criteria for "Employee of the Year" did not differ much from field to field.

Nevertheless, it is worth pondering how much this actually framed the picture of successful employees that is formed by this research, as winners of “Employee of the Year” awards were, and still are, mainly selected by their own labour unions. For example, making one’s occupation renowned can be advantageous for the unions and thus influence someone’s selection. Additionally, persons who are more sociable could be seen as more appealing when being selected as “Employee of the Year”. Nonetheless, and most importantly, “Employee of the Year” winners are top workers rewarded in their own field. Thus, they constitute a group of successful and excellent workers.

4. Results

First we introduce the main characteristics of participants’ careers (analysis of their narratives). After that, we present the meta-narrative of employees’ of the year as the result of narrative analysis.

4.1 *How Can Be the Successful Careers Described?*

Successful employees’ careers can be described by different career models and types. When reflecting those by Driver’s (1982) division (linear, steady state, spiral) it became clear that career types among the top workers are quite dissimilar: One has had a linear career, similar to climbing up a ladder. Someone else’s career appears steadier, when his/her career-related choices present more like long-term commitment to occupation and work as well as diverse areas of mastery and less striving for promotion. Some of the top workers’ careers represent both a spiral and linear career; the career that thrives on alteration and new tasks and at the same time has a forward-moving trajectory.

The police’s, priest’s, psychologist’s, and artisan’s careers exemplified a linear progressing, even if they had proceeded without any major byways in their careers (cf. Inkson & Amundson, 2002). This appeared so that they had educated themselves into their profession and enhanced their professional skills by various in-service educations, and have worked in the positions that are relative to their profession. The nurse and farmer, instead, had either educated themselves in a different occupation or worked in a different field previously and ended up in the present occupation through various phases of life. However, all of the top workers could be described with a metaphor of growth, in which a career is understood as something organic and constantly developing and learning (Inkson & Amundson, 2002).

4.2 *Optimistic Attitude Is the Most Essential Factor in Success at Work*

4.2.1 Finding an occupation that fits

Snyder and Lopez (2002) have pointed out the significance of family, school, development in the youth, and relevant work places in the process of success. Values from one’s upbringing reflect the values of life we acquire—that is, what we want to accomplish or how we aim to live a certain kind of life. This is why the process of becoming a top worker starts from childhood and adolescence. In Finland, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the basis for studying and working consisted of choosing an occupation, finishing studies, aiming at a stable and secure career, and avoiding mistakes (Sundvall-Huhtinen, 2007). This is how the rewarded employees of the year were also advised at home.

Three of the interviewees told that their parents had an idea of an occupation that they considered the most suitable for their children. For two of the top workers, the parents’ occupation affected either the top workers’ future occupation or hobbies to a certain extent. One of the employees of the year had a chance to become a farm owner after his parents but he knew already as a youngster that it would not be a suitable job for him. One of the top workers mentioned about a concrete wish from her father’s side: he would have wanted her to study for a qualified chemist’s profession, but this top worker was not interested in that field.

Only a few interviewees could name a particular idol that would have affected their career-related choices. For example, a police told about his patriotism adopted from home and how it had influenced on his career. A priest described how her spiritual life originated from her own family and relatives as her grandmother used to teach at Sunday school, and the top worker had such pleasant experiences of it. In addition, the friends can have their own effect on the educational and career choices, as one of the top workers revealed. This epitomizes the fact that the youth’s friendships can have quite a significant role in making the choices that influence on the rest of their lives.

School can and should provide guidance as well; and actually, all top workers participated in career counselling at school, but only a few found it somewhat useful. It is worth remembering that the participants’ compulsory education took place in the 1950s–1970s, and counselling was totally different in those days. In the Finnish school system, the themes of a personal study plan and flexibility only started to be used from the 1970s (Sundvall-Huhtinen, 2007).

4.2.2 The factors that enhanced the top workers’ careers the most after having started working

When reflecting the factors that had enhanced the actual career, the top workers were able to name several things

that they considered the most important. Interestingly, these factors did not vary much by occupation. In the process of achieving success at work, willingness to accept new challenges appeared to be an important factor relating to success. Additionally, top workers kept their professional knowledge up to date by in-service education and especially by voluntary education, often in their leisure time.

Still, not all of them aimed at a higher position in the hierarchy but they could pursue developing their professional skills, getting more diverse work tasks, or learning the whole new fields of know-how. Additionally, these matters were considered increasing their work motivation and coping. At its best, a work place provides the employees with the possibilities to develop, find meaning for life, and achieve the social, emotional, and mental wellbeing for the employees (Snyder & Lopez, 2002; see also Sennet, 2004).

Combining work and family responsibilities is a topic of current interest that also concerns employees of the year (see further Uusiautti & Määttä, 2010): for all the solutions were unique, varying from equal division of labour between spouses to a situation in which one was working and the other took care of the home the main point was that it was made together by taking into the consideration aspirations and situations of both, so that neither partner had to give up their own career for the other.

In addition, the rewarded employees of the year emphasized the significance of having a good hobby. Hobbies were seen not only as a counterbalance to work but as providing resources for work. For example, a priest enjoyed both reading and writing novels and poems in his leisure time and it also enhanced his writing skills needed at work. The hobby as a counterbalance is no less important because there is a positive relationship between feeling recovered during leisure time and job performance over time (Binnewies et al., 2009). Positive psychology seeks to pay more attention to leisure time activities and their significance. Positive feelings are linked to physical health (e.g., preventing physical stress disorders), psychological health (e.g., positive coping strategies), and social health. The latter refers to the fact that happy people are more likely to create happy and reciprocal social relationships. (Carruthers & Hood, 2005.)

4.2.3 Obstacles and misjudgements

Above all, the most special characteristic among employees of the year was their positive attitude, a characteristic common to all of the informants. When facing conflicts they did not give up. Instead, they saw such a situation as a good time to reassess their occupational skills and, if necessary, to educate and develop. Thus, conflict situations were seen as problems that had to be solved.

Major obstacles were represented as conflicts experienced in the workplace. Employees of the year emphasized the importance of good relationships in the workplace — not only between co-workers but also vertically between employees and employers. Other obstacles that were more concrete in nature, such as fire in the firm's building or not passing an entrance examination, were confronted more realistically and with an optimistic attitude.

Misjudgements were mainly located in the period of youth. These kinds of byways could be, for example, studying for an occupation which later turns out to be unsuitable. Educators may consider whether these byways could be avoided by relevant counselling. On the other hand, misjudgements of this kind can often be useful too: it is not always a waste of time because the perspective gained from travelling on byways can actually be valuable experience.

To sum up, top workers' careers were not characterized by any actual failures; rather, it is all about acting in a constructive way and considering those situations as opportunities to develop one's skills.

4.3 Narratives: Road to Success at Work

Success at work is not a temporary state but rather, a process. Next, this process will be described through the narratives of the employees of the year. The road to success begins from childhood and then branches into four separate roads before uniting again at the end.

4.3.1 Employee of the Year: The Journey Begins

The journey begins from the childhood and adolescence of the Employee of the Year. His parents encourage him to study and work, and back up his choices. They do not want to force him to choose a certain occupation but give important advice: keep a resilient attitude towards work. How does the story continue? We enter a crossroads that leads in four directions.

4.3.2 Road 1: Straight ahead

At school different occupations are introduced to our employee, but he does not make his decision based on that. Instead, he has already formed an idea as a youngster about which field he is interested in, often due to his admiration of his relatives' career examples and life choices.

After his compulsory education, he applies to a school that could prepare him for his dream occupation. However, things do not always go according to the plan and he does not get into the desired school. Along the road, he finds traffic signs that lead him to an alternative way: he discovers a different road leading to the occupation corresponding to his dream.

Then, the road takes him on to working life. This is a very significant phase in his life, although getting used to work schedules and requirements of different tasks takes some time. He is an enthusiastic worker with a great desire to learn. He looks for more and more responsibilities in order to enhance his career. To advance and meet his challenges he continually educates and develops himself.

He appreciates work that provides opportunities to develop his workplace and himself. New challenges keep him interested and he constantly seeks opportunities to take on more responsibilities. Transitions into positions and taking on new tasks are important road signs on his road to success.

However, his road is not always like a smooth highway but merely bumpy gravel when he confronts obstacles and failures. He has a special way to manage this situation: he sees these difficulties as challenges. Desire to work well and engagement with work lie behind his attitude. He wants to be totally dedicated to his work and feels driven to accomplish all the tasks he has started.

Naturally, his dedication is shown in long work days and total concentration at work. This is possible since his spouse takes care of the family. This division of labour has been made together, but still he does have some compunction: he surely realizes that the more time he spends at work, the less time he has to spend with his family.

Hobbies are important to the employee of the year. He may also have professional use of skills attained in his leisure time: a hobby may even offer an alternative occupation. However, being aware that there is an option might be more important than actually using that option.

The road of the employee of the year clearly goes straight ahead. He has become an innovative and enthusiastic leader or supervisor in his professional field, wanting to devise new solutions and to develop work for the benefit of all. This is why he has been nominated as Employee of the Year: his work has been valued.

After this reward, the employee of the year continues in the same way: he seeks for new challenges or possibilities to get promoted. He is not likely to change his occupation.

4.3.3 Road II: Driving on all the lines

This employee knows early on which occupational field he will orientate himself. He gets into a school of his choice and he acts with initiative. He even goes to his local career counselling office to be sure of his occupational choice. Likewise, he goes working in places related to his dream field in order to be confirmed of the right direction.

After his studies, he receives a position of his dreams and is an extremely diligent and devoted worker. His transition from school to work is not easy but made easier by mentoring system in the workplace as well as a supportive and open-minded work community. The employee advances in his career from one project to another and faces challenges that seem afterwards overwhelming. This suits his way of working. He also studies during his career, both at work and during his leisure time. Opportunities for further education are considered as “ups” in his road whereas conflicts between co-workers are seen as “downs”. He finds these situations particularly stressful but still he tries to work hard persistently because he likes the content of his work. Changing workplace may, however, be the only option because he needs to be surrounded by a good atmosphere at work. Openness and giving and receiving feedback are important to him. However, he thinks that positive feedback is believable only if it is consistent with his own perceptions.

One of the most crucial decisions concerns combining of work and family life because he wants them to be in balance. This is challenging because of his demanding work. Spouses often adjust their schedules in a way that allows both to work and to be at home, especially when their children are small.

As a result of his dedication the employee climbs up the ladder to higher and higher positions. Then he is nominated as Employee of the Year. This is an important leg in his journey confirming that he has chosen the right road.

His hobby represents both a counterbalance to work and valuable activity for his leisure. At the end of and after his career a good, long-term hobby could turn out to be surprisingly significant, because it offers a way to direct his energy to things he is interested in.

4.3.4 Road III: Choosing the safe mid-way

At school, this employee of the year had some career counselling, but it did not help him much. He is not sure at all what he wants to do and goes to vocational school chosen together with his friend! After a few byways, he finds a

route to the right way in military service.

At the beginning of his career he works in different positions. He is interested in his field and learns new skills eagerly. After a few years he gets a position that seems to be the right for him. Achieving promotions is less important to him than working autonomously and developing himself and his work. He enjoys working and is good at it. He also thinks that good social relationships are valuable at work. He likes to brainstorm with colleagues. In addition, he reveres giving and receiving feedback.

This employee of the year invests in his family life, too. He wants to combine work and family, especially when children are young. Thus successful scheduling with his spouse brings plenty of joy and enhances his success.

This top worker thinks that the nomination as an Employee of the Year results from his diligence and appreciation of his work, but he also recognizes the significance of social relationships behind the nomination.

After nomination his road goes on as it did before. He has never considered a career change and is unlikely to do so in future. He has found the right way: by obtaining new skills and proficiency, the rest of his journey stays interesting until the end of his career.

4.3.4 Road IV: From byways to interstate

After compulsory education this employee finds himself at a fundamental crossroads. He does not have a clue where he should be heading to when he is already supposed to have made a decision about his vocational education. In career counselling he was only assisted to select between college and vocational school, and that was not of any help. He has to do something, so he goes to vocational school. Soon he realizes that he does not fit into the field he is studying. He travels on several byways, until at some point he finds a signpost that leads him to the right direction. This kind of signpost could be found during non-military service, a gap year or summer job.

Driving on byways is not a total waste of time, because along the way he matures and gets a better perspective on life. Critically, he must have enough strength to search and listen to himself. Finding the right road is important and eventually that might be the result of coincidence or happenstance.

Finally, the employee starts working in a job that he feels is the most suitable one. He enhances his professional skills with various courses and education. He is anxious to participate in in-service education. Keeping his work content interesting is of great importance to him. He approaches his work systematically and deepens his knowledge by gaining new areas of expertise.

Good social relationships enhance his career journey and he considers a supportive work environment and the open flow of information important to work satisfaction and coping. Still, conflict situations can occur, and he feels those as especially stressful and diminishing of motivation. Other obstacles might present themselves too. The time might come to think over what would be the best solution and way to proceed.

The employee does not have any children; work plays such a major role in his life that distinguishing work and leisure time sometimes seems impossible. Hobbies present a way to concentrate on something other than work.

Now, his road has come to the point where he is nominated as the Employee of the Year because of his talents and dedication. He will continue on this field, because he has found — after wandering aimlessly in early life — a field that really suits him and that allows him to use his talents and act innovatively.

4.3.5 The rest of the journey

The career of the employee of the year does not end with this nomination; nor does this mean that there is nothing left to achieve. Instead, this top worker continues seeking new challenges and developing his professional skills. He will not change his occupational field, although working is not always a bed of roses. He has found the right way.

Therefore, seeing the finishing line looming up could represent a difficult phase for the employee of the year. Letting go off the work to which he has been devoted and that has played a great role in his life, will not be easy. Firstly, he has to admit that he is getting older. As retirement gets closer, one has to cut down work tasks and start planning for life after work. If there were no life outside work, retirement could seem intimidating and seem like the end of the journey. But as an Employee of the Year, he will know how to deal with life after work: He will regard it as a challenge and an opportunity to find another successful road for the rest of his journey.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

Success at work is not a temporary state but rather, a process; neither were the top workers' careers equally logical, organized, controlled, and phased. Instead of career planning, the concept of career skills would be relevant when describing the career journeys of these rewarded employees. This means that their careers are seen as expedient and built by a process in which one has acted actively and innovatively when searching the most suitable routes to

proceed (Amundson, 2005).

There are a number of felicitous ways of describing and analyzing the top workers' career process. For example, according to Baltes and Freund's (2006) selection- optimization- compensation (SOC) – model, the development through the whole life span has three fundamental processes. The combination of these processes is an efficient and versatile mechanism that the individuals, groups, and societies can use in order to achieve higher action levels and to control the future challenges. The rewarded employees of the year had selected an occupation that fitted the best for them, they had optimized their talents and professional skills, and, when it comes to compensation, they were able for example to change their plans in order to successfully handle the challenging or conflict situation.

Likewise, Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon (2001) encourage employees to reflect their work from three perspectives: the mission (how the work is like of its nature and why the society is paying for doing this particular work – what its meaning is), the standards (what kind of performance is expected in this particular work and what kind of employee can perform the best in this work), and the identity of the work (what the ethical and moral features of the work are and how they are justified). Basically, this kind of reflection the rewarded employees of the year had made constantly during their careers.

Then again, the ability to consciously control one's behaviour when needed has an essential prerequisite of the functioning and well-being of a human being. The people of this kind, such as the employees of the year, are persistent, flexible, and apter to have positive emotions than negative ones and to handle the stressful situations in life efficiently. (Baltes & Freund, 2006.)

The top workers' pursue for success and better life can also be reflected through the theory of hedonic treadmill (see Diener, Lucas, & Napa Scollon, 2006) according to which people are constantly striving for happier life because they believe that the greater happiness results from achieving the next goal or solving the next problem. In other words, there is always something to achieve and to strive for.

It seems that the positive development of becoming a top worker cannot be explained separately from a consideration of the individual's environment (Magnusson & Mahoney, 2006). Factors that have an effect on success outside work life are: overall life situation, family, friends, hobbies, physical and psychological health, and so on. And today these things are of greater importance in employees' lives than ever before.

In many ways, the rewarded employees of the year are quite different from each other as we would expect from people with unique characteristics. Also, their attitudes towards working and studying were often adopted from home and reflect their parents' support and level of acceptance. For example, Mäkikangas (2007) discovered that child-centred upbringing predicts an optimistic attitude later in adulthood. Optimism is a quality that depicts top workers extremely well. This cannot be a coincidence: according to Carver and Scheier (2002), optimism is one of the most central building blocks of positive development.

All things considered, the core in the success is that you have an optimistic attitude towards work and life in general and towards yourself as well: without faith in yourself, there is not any point in trying to succeed. Maddux (2002) sums up the recipe for success in the following brilliant way: "This truth is that believing that you can accomplish what you want to accomplish is one of the most important ingredients—perhaps the most important ingredient—in the recipe for success."

Positive psychology concentrates on determining what can be done in order to get the best out of people—students, employees, and etcetera (Snyder & Lopez, 2002). After compulsory education, the young have to make important choices that will have an influence on the rest of their lives. Making decisions should be easier if they are aware of their strengths and weaknesses as well as different possibilities open to them. That is why lifestyle and personality are nowadays being considered in the career counselling process more than ever (see also Tang, 2003). However, mistakes can inevitably happen. Thus, we need to have the students we are counselling to realize all the possibilities and motivate them to get excited about them (Sundvall-Huhtinen, 2007). From the study presented here of the top workers and their careers one question arises: How can an educator provide as many students as possible with the experience of finding their own way and expressing their own personal characters?

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