

# e-mentor

DWUMIESIĘCZNIK SZKOŁY GŁÓWNEJ HANDLOWEJ W WARSZAWIE  
WSPÓŁWYDAWCA: FUNDACJA PROMOCJI I AKREDYTACJI KIERUNKÓW EKONOMICZNYCH

2019, No 3(80)



Metelski, A. (2019). Modern Perceptions of Career Success. *e-mentor*, 3(80), 45–50.  
DOI: 10.15219/em80.1422



## Modern Perceptions of Career Success

Adam Metelski\*

*This article is an attempt to determine the modern meaning of career success. The perception of career success has undergone changes in recent years, with subjective indicators such as job satisfaction and achievement of one's own professional goals growing in importance. The present article reviews the relevant literature and presents the results of the author's own study on the meaning of career success conducted among students of economics. The results indicate that career success is defined subjectively in the modern world, and is no longer confined to the objective indicators commonly applied in the literature. Thus organizations may find traditional incentive tools to be increasingly ineffective.*

### The concept of career success in relevant literature

Prior to defining the complex term *career success*, it is first necessary to define the meaning of the simple term *success*. Dictionaries define it as *the achieving of positive results, such as in the case of an event; accomplishment, triumph* (Sobol, 2005, p. 973). Success can be understood as the sum of accomplishments in particular social roles, e.g. those of a husband, superior, father or friend, or as achievements in a given field, e.g. at work (Młodawska, 2015).

In the case of career success, several definitions exist. Judge et al. define it as "positive psychological or work-related results or personal and professional accomplishments one has accumulated as a consequence of work experiences" (Judge, Cable, Boudreau and Bretz, 1995). Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom (2005, p. 179) define career success as the achieving of desired work-related results at any moment in an individual's career experience. Bohdziewicz (2008, p. 279) claims that the principal indicator of success used by individuals is the achievement of the long-term professional goals they set for themselves. The above definitions demonstrate that career success is not a precisely-defined term. Many scholars forgo

defining the term, instead directly proceeding to operationalize it (Gunz and Mayrhofer, 2011, p. 253).

Gunz and Mayrhofer (2011) believe that career success should be analyzed from three primary perspectives: conditionary, boundative and temporal. In other words, career success is a state an individual is in at a given moment in time, limited by social space and seen within the context of that person's entire career path. A good example which illustrates this model is that of a sailor. Knowing only his location at sea, it is difficult to determine whether his journey is a success. This is due to the fact that we lack information on where he sailed from, his destination and time spent at sea. Similarly, it is difficult to compare how successful several sailors would be if they were in a similar location as a great deal of important data is missing: the performance of their boats, departure times, whether there were any problems along the way and what the weather was like. By the same token, based only on a person's income, it is difficult to assess their career success as it is also important to know how that person reached the position in which they are able to earn that amount. Was it a result of taking over a prosperous family business, or was it perhaps achieved after years of hard work climbing the career ladder? Gunz and Mayrhofer (2011) propose a framework for conceptualizing career success. First, an individual's situation is analyzed from the perspective of their status, health, being proud of any accomplishments, job satisfaction etc. The difficulties and hurdles encountered along the way are then analyzed, as it is important to know the context of and interpret biographical events. Finally, the temporal perspective is determined, as the amount of time the individual required to achieve their position in life is a critical indicator of career success. It is also recommended to regularly take into account theories from other fields, including economics, psychology, sociology and management.

\* Poznan University of Economics, Poland

---

**Objective and subjective indicators of career success**

---

The literature most frequently lists two criteria of career success: objective – measurable, accessible to external subjects, and subjective – accessible only to the person in question (Arthur et al., 2005; Gunz and Mayrhofer, 2011; Heslin, 2005; Judge et al., 1995; Schomburg, 2007). Objectively, career success can be described using observable and measurable indicators such as pay, promotion and the social status of a profession. The majority of researchers focus on objective indicators (Judge et al., 1995). Subjective career success, on the other hand, is related to the feelings one has towards a job. The primary indicator in this case is job or career satisfaction, in addition to being proud of one's accomplishments and work-life balance. The concept of job satisfaction is a popular one among economists and psychologists, as evidenced by the number of terms and definitions developed in these areas (Sowińska, 2014). Locke (1976, p. 1300) defines it as a "pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences". Career satisfaction, on the other hand, is defined as one's satisfaction resulting from the internal and external aspects of one's career, including pay, promotions and development opportunities (Greenhaus, Parasuraman and Wormley, 1990).

It is important to remember the relation between objective and subjective career success (Gunz and Heslin, 2005). Some researchers claim that objective success influences subjective success (Poole, Langan-Fox and Omodei, 1993), assuming that career success is determined by one's income or prestige, and that individuals appraise their success based on objective achievements. However, other researchers believe subjective success to be more important than objective success (Aryee, Chay and Tan, 1994). Proponents of this view are primarily psychologists, who hypothesize that there exists a relation between personality, attitude and career success. Others propose that the subjective and objective aspects of career success could be intertwined (Seibert, Kraimer and Liden, 2001). It is possible that this interdependence develops over time (Arthur et al., 2005) – individuals experiencing objective reality may develop an image of what career success means. An example of this is the organizational "age norms" – a notion commonly held by employees of an organization regarding the age at which someone should be promoted to a given position.

Heslin (2005) claims that changes have occurred over recent decades which have diminished the importance of certain objective indicators of career success. One of these factors is the importance of development via hierarchical promotion (Kawka, 2014, p. 107). Many specialists and managers work as contractors and consultants (Ganiron, 2013), which leads to a decline in promotion as the primary indicator of success. The imperfect nature of objective indicators such as pay and promotions also stems from the fact that, for a certain part of the population, they are not the

primary indicators of success. For example, teachers may appraise their careers based on the performance of their students, taxi drivers may base their appraisals upon the number of years without traffic accidents, and doctors based on the number of patients saved. In such cases, even if certain achievements do not result in a higher pay or promotion, one's appraisal of career success may be high. Many individuals strive for less measurable achievements, such as work-life balance or a sense of purpose.

The importance of objective and subjective aspects is effectively illustrated in Friedman and Greenhaus (2000). More than 800 employees were asked to assign relative importance to 15 potential indicators of career success. The analysis of the results rendered it possible to identify five dimensions of career success: 1) status, 2) leisure time, 3) challenge, 4) security and 5) social factor. Apart from status, all these aspects are subjective criteria and extend beyond objective factors such as prestige, power, money or promotions. This disregard for objective factors may stem from the fact that high pay and promotion do not always make individuals proud or happy. In reality, the opposite may be true, as a promotion and pay raise may sometimes result in alienation and depressive reactions (Heslin, 2005). This may happen in a situation where a newly-appointed manager fails to delegate responsibilities sufficiently quickly and becomes overburdened with work. This may lead to a depressive reaction and both an objective and subjective lack of career success.

Subjective appraisals of career success are most frequently described in terms of job satisfaction (Ganiron, 2013, Gunz and Heslin, 2005, Gunz and Mayrhofer, 2011). This stems from the belief that someone who is satisfied with many aspects of their job probably believes that they have achieved career success. However, Heslin (2005) lists certain limitations concerning the use of job satisfaction as an indicator of career success. First, a person who believes in having a good career will not always think otherwise when they enter a new work place which does not meet their expectations. Second, an individual may be satisfied with their current position, but dissatisfied with their professional achievements in general. Third, a satisfying job with limited growth potential may offer a minimal sense of career success. Fourth, an individual may even greatly dislike their current job, but may be satisfied with their career due to its prospects. The best example here are students who apply for internships which are not always satisfying, but are believed to constitute an investment in their future. Fifth, high job satisfaction may not always lead to a subjective sense of career success, in particular if health and family life is sacrificed as a result. In conclusion, it should be emphasized that job satisfaction is only one of several elements of subjective career success. A subjective appraisal of career success consists of an individual's reactions to actual and expected career-related developments. It is also influenced by one's sense of identity, purpose and work-life bal-

ance, thus making it significantly more complex than satisfaction with one's current position.

## Most important factors determining career success

A study was conducted in thirty countries to determine what executives of medium and large enterprises consider career success (Cesarz-Kwietniak and Sawicka, 2013). In the majority of the countries studied, work-life balance was the most frequently-listed factor. Only in Poland and three other countries was pay the dominant factor. This most likely stems from the fact that, compared to Western Europe, Poland is still a developing country where it is necessary to work hard to live on a level close to the European average. Figure 1 contains the factors of career success considered important in Poland and the rest of the world (respondents could select multiple answers).

It is worth noting that career priorities change with age. An important aspect of the above study (Cesarz-Kwietniak and Sawicka, 2013) was the division of respondents into three age groups: the post-World War II baby boom generation (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (1965–1978) and Generation Y (1979–1994). This division was applied because age influences career priorities, as 51.1% of Generation Y respondents considered pay to be the most important career success indicator, with as little as 38.1% of those born before 1964 listing it as the dominant factor. A possible explanation is that young people are only now beginning to earn money and aspire to obtain material wealth such as cars, travel, apartments etc. It should also be noted that age influences job satisfaction levels. Young people most frequently expressed dissatisfaction regarding their current jobs (only a 22% satisfaction rate), with baby boomers being least likely to do so (47% satisfaction rate). It is interesting to note

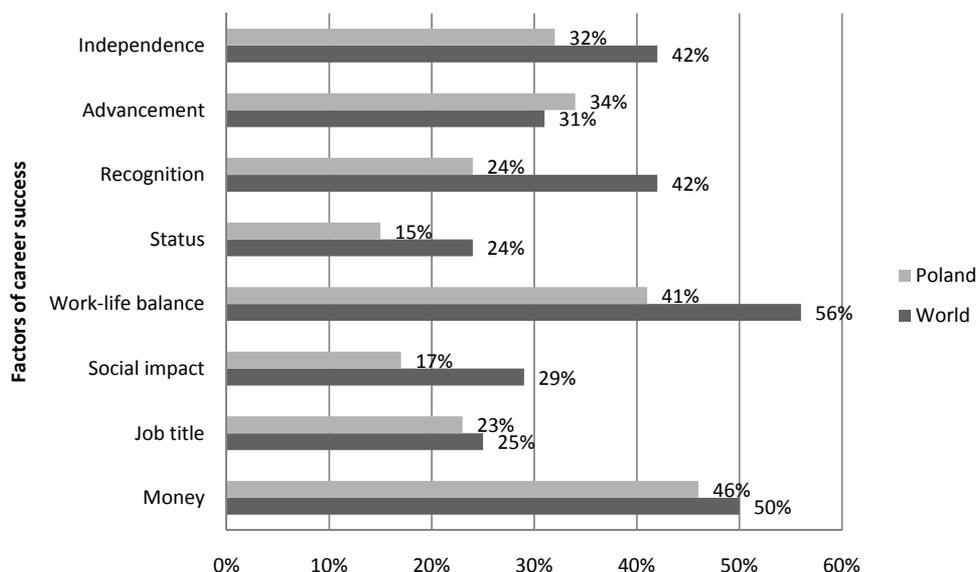
that gender also had an impact on factor selection. Men considered money to be the most important factor, while women preferred to have a work-life balance. To conclude, it is worth noting that more than two-thirds of all respondents believed it was possible to have a successful career and private life at the same time. Moreover, being able to balance the two was the fundamental criterion influencing the career decisions of a large group of respondents.

It is also worth presenting what the respondents of *Diagnoza Społeczna (Social Diagnosis; Czapiński and Panek, 2015)* considered to be the most important career factors. In all four *Social Diagnosis* editions analyzed (conducted in 2009, 2011, 2013 and 2015), "adequate pay" was selected most frequently. A detailed distribution of the most frequently chosen answers can be found in Table 1. The respondents could select from among 12 factors. For example, in 2015, the fourth and further most frequently chosen factors were: *work matching one's skill set* (29.4%), *independence* (21.6%), *personal development* (21.4%), *convenient hours* (16.8%), *opportunities for rapid promotion* (4.1%), *long vacation* (3.4%), *respect* (3.1%), *being able to work from home* (2.9%) and *other factors* (1.9%). These results are in line with Byłok's (2005, p. 87) claim that:

It is money that becomes one of the most important indicators of success in modern society. This results in the market becoming an arena for economic rivalry, like a game where money is the measure of success. One of the consequences of financial success is the individual prestige of being a successful person.

In another study, respondents were asked to select what in their opinion are the characteristics of a successful career (Firkowska-Mankiewicz, 1999). The most frequent associations included various

**Figure 1. Factors determining professional success according to international study participants**



Source: author's own work based on Cesarz-Kwietniak and Sawicka (2013).

**Table 1. Most important professional factors**

Year	Three most frequently chosen answers and their percentages		
2009	1. Adequate pay 76.4	2. Lack of tension or stress 52.2	3. Job security 49.0
2011	1. Adequate pay 67.1	2. Lack of tension or stress 55.7	3. Job security 51.7
2013	1. Adequate pay 65.0	2. Job security 54.4	3. Lack of tension or stress 53.3
2015	1. Adequate pay 68.6	2. Lack of tension or stress 60.0	3. Job security 58.6

Source: author's own work based on the *Diagnoza Społeczna* integrated database, www.diagnoza.com [09.05.2017].

characteristics related to material wealth, e.g. *having money, getting hold of something*. Less frequent were connotations related to work and position, e.g. *being satisfied with one's work*.

Heslin (2005, p. 118) claims that an important factor in appraising success is who we compare ourselves with. Someone may appraise their career based on their own criteria, but also based on the achievements and aspirations of others. Personal criteria include resolutions concerning earning a particular amount by a certain age. In this case, the individual does not compare themselves to others, instead follows their own plan and assesses whether they are moving closer to achieving their goal. However, it is more frequently the case that individuals compare themselves to others. In such cases, their appraisal of success depends on the achievements of others and the results of comparisons.

Another important factor of career success is the opinion of immediate family members. For example, if a young individual continues family traditions regarding their choice of profession, it may constitute social learning and adopting of other people's expectations as their own indicators of success. It is also worth noting that many magazines and television programs present career success as synonymous with wealth. From this perspective, all appraisals of career success must be based on comparisons with others. Heslin (2003) studied the criteria based on which MBA students appraise their career success. The study participants were asked to appraise their career success and provide a justification for their appraisal. A total of 68% of the respondents compared themselves with others, citing reasons such as: *my pay is relatively high compared to my peers or people younger than me have advanced further in their careers than me*.

### Professional success as defined by economics students

A questionnaire study was conducted among students of the Poznań University of Economics in 2018, the purpose being to determine what the students consider as career success. A total of 267 students participated in the study, including 53.3% women and 46.7% men. The average age was 21. The participants were asked to write several sentences on what they believed constituted career success. Their responses were grouped into categories and are presented in Table 2.

The participants most frequently defined career success as having a satisfying job which paid well. In second place was achieving professional goals and self-fulfillment at work, and in third place was achieving growth and good pay. It is important to note that the majority of the participants focused on two aspects of career success, and only a small portion listed only one factor, e.g. *satisfaction* (5.1%). This stems from the fact that career success is difficult to define in terms of a single feature – a minimum of two aspects must be taken into account when defining it.

It is also worth noting that the most popular answer, *satisfaction and good pay*, consisted of both a subjective (satisfaction) and an objective (pay) aspect. It thus appears that analyses of career success should focus primarily on these two aspects, which is the sense of satisfaction with one's work and pay. Also interesting is the fact that, in this study, work-life balance proved to be of lesser importance, even though it was the most important factor in other studies. Having a satisfying job and a work-life balance constituted career success for only 4.1% of all

**Table 2. Most frequent definitions of professional success provided by PUE students**

No.	What is professional success?	Percentage
1.	Satisfaction and good income	33.0
2.	Achieving goals, self-fulfillment	15.2
3.	Growth and income	6.5
4.	Satisfaction	5.1
5.	Satisfaction and balance	4.0

Source: author's own work.

participants. The reason for this may be that they were all young individuals, most of whom were yet to start families.

## Summary

In conclusion, individuals frequently define career success in subjective terms which elude the objective indicators used in the relevant literature. It is thus important to remember that objective aspects (e.g. pay and promotions) do not constitute accurate indicators of career success. Moreover, job and career satisfaction may be insufficient to represent the broad spectrum of factors which influence one's subjective appraisal of career success. Individuals appraise their career success based on various factors which extend beyond the typical indicators. Januszkiewicz (2012) correctly claims that being success-oriented has become natural in the modern world, and that it is commonly believed that success can be achieved by every employee. Individuals decide what career success is to them, as well as where and when they want to achieve it (Cybal-Michalska, 2013). Everyone can achieve success in line with their own definition. For some, success is being promoted, for others it is experience or independence. In light of the above, organizations may find traditional incentive tools to be increasingly ineffective.

The results of the study conducted among economics students indicate that young people consider job satisfaction, the ability to develop and self-fulfillment at work to be extremely important. Pay is still a very important objective factor, though it was the only objective aspect listed by the participants. This implies that what motivates young people most is finding a job which offers them satisfaction and opportunities to achieve their personal professional goals. Managers should take into account the changing perceptions of career success and adapt the incentive tools used by their companies accordingly. It is a valid claim that job satisfaction and development opportunities are currently more important than promotions or prestige.

This article was an attempt to answer the question of what constitutes career success in the modern world. The results indicate that the term is exceptionally difficult to define, and that modern definitions of career success differ from those used in the past. What is more, the term is frequently used in common parlance, and its inherent subjectivity means that its construal may continue to change. All this necessitates that analyses of career success take into account various perspectives and include both objective and subjective factors. Only thus is it possible to assume with certainty that we are actually studying career success and not just its constituent indicators, such as pay and job satisfaction.

## References

- Arthur, M.B., Khapova, S.N., & Wilderom, C.P.M. (2005). Career success in a boundaryless career world. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26(2), 177–202. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.290>
- Aryee, S., Chay, Y.W., & Tan, H.H. (1994). An Examination of the Antecedents of Subjective Career Success Among a Managerial Sample in Singapore. *Human Relations*, 47(5), 487–509. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872679404700502>
- Bohdziewicz, P. (2008). *Kariery zawodowe w gospodarce opartej na wiedzy*. Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.
- Byłok, F. (2005). Wzór sukcesu w społeczeństwie polskim w okresie transformacji społeczno-ustrojowej. *Annales. Etyka w Życiu Gospodarczym*, 8(1), 87–96.
- Cesarz-Kwietniak, N., & Sawicka, M. (2013). *Czym dla menedżerów jest sukces?* Retrieved from <https://www.hbr.org/pl/a/czym-dla-menedzerow-jest-sukces/10K1FJiyN>
- Cybal-Michalska, A. (2013). Świat w którym „kariera robi karierę” – o satysfakcji z kariery i poczuciu zawodowego sukcesu. *Studia Edukacyjne*, 26, 19–38.
- Czapiński, J., & Panek, T. (2015). *Diagnoza Społeczna 2015*. Retrieved from [www.diagnoza.com](http://www.diagnoza.com)
- Firkowska-Mankiewicz, A. (1999). *Zdolnym być... Kariery i sukces życiowy warszawskich trzydziestolatków*. Warszawa: IFiS PAN.
- Friedman, S.D., & Greenhaus, J.H. (2000). *Work and family – allies or enemies?* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ganiron, T.U. (2013). Social Capital and Career Success of Civil Engineers towards Designing Career Paths. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 102, 611–621. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.10.778>
- Greenhaus, J.H., Parasuraman, S., & Wormley, W.M. (1990). Effects of Race on Organizational Experiences, Job Performance Evaluations, and Career Outcomes. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(1), 64–86.
- Gunz, H., & Heslin, P.A. (2005). Reconceptualizing career success. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26(2), 105–111. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.300>
- Gunz, H., & Mayrhofer, W. (2011). Re-conceptualizing career success: a contextual approach. *Zeitschrift Für Arbeitsmarkt Forschung*, 43(3), 251–260. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12651-010-0049-z>
- Heslin, P.A. (2003). Self- and Other-Referent Criteria of Career Success. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 11(3), 262–286. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072703254500>
- Heslin, P.A. (2005). Conceptualizing and evaluating career success. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26(2), 113–136. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.270>
- Januszkiewicz, K. (2012). Sukces zawodowy w percepcji pokolenia Y. *Studia Ekonomiczne Regionu Łódzkiego*, 8, 351–362.
- Judge, T.A., Cable, D.M., Boudreau, J.W., & Bretz, R.D. (1995). An Empirical Investigation of the Predictors of Executive Career Success. *Personnel Psychology*, 48(3), 485–519. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1995.tb01767.x>
- Kawka, T. (2014). *Wynagrodzenia w organizacjach nowej gospodarki*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu.
- Locke, E.A. (1976). The nature and causes of job satisfaction. In M.D. Dunnette (Ed.) *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (pp. 1297–1343). Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Młodawska, E. (2015). *Czym jest i od czego zależy sukces zawodowy?* Retrieved from <http://www.psychologia.net.pl/artykul.php?level=748>
- Poole, M.E., Langan-Fox, J., & Omodei, M. (1993). Contrasting subjective and objective criteria as determi-

nants of perceived career success: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 66(1), 39–54. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8325.1993.tb00515.x>

Schomburg, H. (2007). The professional success of higher education graduates. *European Journal of Education*, 42(1), 35–57. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2007.00286.x>

Seibert, S.E., Kraimer, M.L., & Liden, R.C. (2001). A Social Capital Theory of Career Success. *Academy of Management*, 44(2), 219–237. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3069452>

Sobol, E. (2005). *Słownik języka polskiego*. Warszawa: PWN.

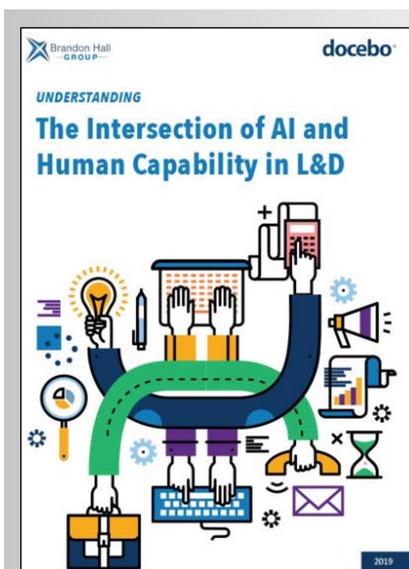
Sowińska, A. (2014). Zadolenie z pracy – problemy definicyjne. *Studia Ekonomiczne*, 197, 45–56.

## Abstract

*This article constitutes an attempt to determine the modern meaning of career success. Over the recent years, its perception has undergone changes, with subjective indicators such as job satisfaction and achievement of one's own professional goals growing in importance. The present article reviews the relevant literature and presents the results of the author's own study on the meaning of career success conducted among students of economics. The results indicate that career success is defined subjectively in the modern world and is no longer confined to the objective indicators commonly applied in literature. Thus, organizations may find traditional incentive tools to be increasingly ineffective.*

**Keywords:** career success, job satisfaction, salary, compensation

Adam Metelski is a Doctor of Economics and Assistant Lecturer at the Poznan University of Economics. His research interests include career success, sports and motivation to work.



## WE RECOMMEND

### *Understanding the Intersection of AI and Human Capability in L&D*

The world is more chaotic and complex than ever but learning technology has the potential to mitigate this complexity by augmenting our intelligence and equipping people with the skills they need to adapt and evolve. We should emphasize the importance of understanding the relationship between artificial intelligence and human beings. The best results are achieved by people and machines working in tandem.

It is also important to understand what AI is and what it isn't. Most of what we encounter today is really machine learning, where software uses algorithms to learn and recognize patterns. These algorithms are derived from deep learning, where software is designed like the neural network of the brain to absorb and interpret data.

These changes require the L&D function to change, as well. Far from AI taking jobs away, it is creating new needs and opportunities that companies must be ready to face. This means a new focus on the types of tools

used to create and deliver learning, as well as what it takes to lead learning into the future.

Publisher: Brandon Hall Group, 2019. Licensed for distribution by Docebo.

More information at <https://elearningindustry.com/free-ebooks/artificial-intelligence-and-human-capability-in-ld>