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## Objectivity in evaluating professional career development

### Abstract

Adopting a proactive attitude focused on professional development is essential in the contemporary, volatile environment. Objective and subjective indicators are used when evaluating the development of a professional career. However, the adequateness of the criteria chosen for evaluation is ambiguous due to the limitations of both objective and subjective measures. In this article, on the basis of a review of literature, objective and subjective measures of professional progression were characterized, and the possible distortions of objective evaluation resulting from applying them were identified. The evolution of the career paradigm results in the need to verify professional development in the modern approach, which strongly highlights the subjective prospects of a professional career that reflect an individually planned concept of oneself. Nevertheless, a possible criticism regarding subjective measures is lack of objectivity in career evaluation. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to analyze the relationship between the objective and subjective measures of professional careers. The study was based on an online questionnaire which covered 190 employees employed in large and medium-sized companies in Poland. The study confirmed the positive relationship between the measures, and shows the direction of the relationship, showing that the subjective and objective criteria commensurately indicate career development. Career satisfaction can be successfully used in the assessment of professional development, thus giving reliable results for its advancement.

**Keywords:** professional career, subjective success, objective success, professional development, career evaluation measures

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### Introduction

The processes of integration, globalization, and dynamic development involve civilization and business changes. These transformations, when used skillfully, may be the source of competitive advantages, from the point of view of the economy, organizations, and individuals. A number of new opportunities, blurring borders of all kinds, and changes in the standards binding on the labor market, cause the evolution of professional careers. The traditional understanding of these is being replaced by non-linear and adaptive professional career routes.

A change in the construct of professional careers and success is noticeable in the literature in the form of new dimensions and perspectives of the term being defined. In 1961, Wilensky defined a *career* as an ordered sequence, consisting in moving from positions located lower in the hierarchy and with little prestige to higher and more respected ones. Less than twenty years later, Super (1980) turned his attention to a set of roles played throughout someone's entire life. Finally, at the beginning of the twentieth first century, the universal definition of a *career* is a sequence of professional experiences evolving in time (Arthur et al., 2005). Such a transformation in the approach to a career from professional duty, and even the resulting pressure, towards accumulating experiences, highlights the growing significance of subjective professional space.

The new reality requires verification of the methods of professional career exemplification. The subjective approach to career and the resulting consequences of the individual creation of a professional path must coexist with ensuring the reliability and validity of assessment. The risk of losing objectivity resulting from inadequate selection of parameters for career assessment can be reduced by proving the correlation between the parameters. Due to the diversified approach to operationalizing the careers in the existing literature, there is a great need to specify the relationships

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between the subjective and objective parameters. Evaluating the development of a professional career could prove crucial in better understanding the needs of employees and the strategies of their professional careers. The purpose of this article is to assess career progression by means of objective and subjective measures and to examine the relationship between them. Moreover, the aim is to analysis of the simultaneous occurrence of objective and subjective success and identification of the dependencies and impact of objective measures on subjective satisfaction with one's career. The research is preceded by a review of literature to determine the essence of subjective and objective measures of a professional career and their limitations that have a negative impact on the objectivity of the evaluation.

Choosing the career evaluation criteria is often problematic, not only for scholars and scientists, but also for individuals who are creators of the career path. Professional success is undoubtedly desirable, however, owing to differing priorities and value systems of particular individuals, to grasp it is highly contextual and complex. For this reason, analysis of subjective measures of career progression seems crucial. Moreover, those measures represented by career satisfaction have not received as much attention and research in Central and Eastern Europe as in Western Europe or America (Kowal & Roztocki, 2015). Therefore, in empirical research conducted by the author it is important to take into account both the Polish labor market and the contemporary approach to a professional career.

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## Objective and subjective career measures

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A career, its development, and professional success achieved are one of the more important fields of interest of both management theoreticians and practitioners. The positive effects of a career being pursued are multi-dimensional, starting from individual motivations, self-evaluation, living conditions, to organizational aspects, such as an increase in a company's market value, growing profits, or creating a competitive position within a strategic group. A career is both a certain descriptive method of determining the course of subsequent stages and phases of one's professional life, as well as a term which is evaluating and verifying in nature, referring to changes in professional development (De Vos & Soens, 2008).

The main categorization of careers and career success is the division into the objective and subjective dimensions performed by Hughes (1937). The attributes of an objective approach to a career are the measurability and verifiability by an unbiased third party, and the subjective understanding of the career points to the exclusive perspective of, and evaluation by the person directly experiencing it. Thus, the objective indicators will be measurable achievements, examples of which are: remuneration, promotion, professional status, authorization to delegate work, or serving a management function.

The objective parameters are an important determinant of the degree of fulfilment of basic daily needs (Nicholson & De Waal-Andrews, 2005), but also reflect the efficiency of an individual being assessed by the employer. Defining professional success in the objective and externally observable categories is characteristic for the traditional career model. However, the current understanding of career highlights that success is no longer a totally static and objective fact, but a social and very dynamic structure (Savickas, 2005).

The subjective career development measure is how a person judges their own professional abilities and achievements, and evaluates the potential of the human capital created. In addition, an important role is played by the satisfaction with the course of one's career and particular experiences accumulated throughout someone's whole professional life (Srivastava et al., 2010). Subjectively perceived career results cover a long time period, and are associated with a sense of security and the perceived socio-economic status, but also a sense of identity and the balance between private and professional life (Finegold & Mohrman, 2001). Among the subjective measures, there is another notable distinction. A comparative standard may be a subjective belief, which refers to oneself or others in the environment (Heslin, 2005). In the first case, a satisfaction level is used to judge individual aspirations. The second dimension is based on evaluation in comparison to a certain reference group, and the social standards prevailing in it.

At the moment, literature does not favor significantly any of the approaches to operationalizing careers. The focus is on both the objective and the subjective results of individual professional experiences. Although the subjective and objective career effects are separate constructs, they are related to a large extent and can overlap and strengthen each other (Spurk et al., 2018). While examining the relationship between subjective and objective professional success, Abele and Spurk (2009) prove that a positive change in the objective success parameters in a community being analyzed leads to a positive change in the subjectively experienced success. A longitudinal study performed over nine years made it possible to verify the long-term impact of the two dimensions on each other. The main discovery of the authors is a strong, positive impact of the subjective success on the objective results. It turns out that the subjective success is not only a result or by-product of measurable, and often financial professional achievements, but rather it is a determinant of measurable long-term achievements.

Previous studies on the link between objective professional success and the subjective assessment of an employee in traditional professional career models also indicate a positive correlation (Judge et al., 1995). Valcour and Ladge (2008) confirm the link between professional success internal and external measures, highlighting the relation between income

and satisfaction with one's career. Card et al. (2012) indicate, however, that this dependence occurs only up to a certain level of received income. The author shows that an increase in salary above the median does not increase satisfaction. Moreover, a systematic review of literature revealed certain career predictors that may have different effects on subjective and objective career indicators (Spurk et al., 2018). Van den Born and Witteloostuijn (2013) identified for instance the work-life balance motivations. Striving for flexibility and balance has a positive effect on subjectively assessed professional success, but in the case of objective exemplification, the relationship is negative.

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### Limitations in evaluating professional career development

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In order to evaluate the achievements, it is necessary to determine certain standards that an individual will apply to evaluate and make comparisons (Schwarz, 1999). Success in a career is the actual or perceived achievement attained by an employee as a result of their professional actions and experience (Judge et al., 1999), but the value attributed to them is specific for each person individually, due to varying reference points based on idiosyncratic templates. Professional success is what an individual defines using the notion referred to above, because their point of view depends on their individual needs and social roles. When measuring and evaluating one's career, the limitations both in the objective and subjective measures must be taken into consideration.

One restriction of the subjective measures is their strong dependence on individually presented attitudes, ambitions, and actions. Evaluating the development of a career by means of subjective measures may cause a certain disproportion in the professional progress achieved. This results from a different system of values, motivations, and specific goals, and a different amount of material and intangible wealth that brings satisfaction (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Additionally, the subjective measures of development are moderated by psychological variables, such as personality, temper, propensity for optimism, and specific characteristics, such as self-confidence, or belief in one's capabilities. The attitude of researchers towards the subjective measures is often marked by a low level of trust, since they are not based on evidence and facts. There is a certain probability of manipulation in how people process and interpret questions, and thus how they answer and provide material for analyses. Any cognitive problems resulting from insufficient understanding, different perception, or insufficient stability of individual evaluations, which may change over time, or the mood of a person being surveyed, require particular attention and focus when interpreting the data and drawing conclusions on that basis (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2001).

On the other hand, despite the fact that the objective approach seems to be adequate and reliable, it may also distort the real picture to some extent. Ob-

jective success is a construct experienced and defined differently for example, on the basis of a profession, its rules, the working environment, or location. A person's investments in their education and developing skills are rewarded and valued by the labor market differently. Thorndike (1963) also pointed out that there are groups of professions in which the objective criteria related to careers very much restrict evaluations of achievements and employee development, and thus the professional success achieved. Examples include groups of professions with rigid and institutionalized remuneration and promotion rules, such as civil services or armed forces.

The objective indicators are restricted by the need to continuously adjust them to changing organizational and market conditions. They are hardly comparable between sectors which operate on different principles, work systems, and financial and social norms (Dette et al., 2004). The current devaluation of this group of parameters is also based on continuously declining significance of hierarchical career models with a clear and predictable career path (Reitman & Schmeer, 2003). One of the premises is the shrinking sizes of organizations or the extensive use of outsourcing (Evans et al., 1997). As a result, the hierarchical progression is being replaced by enrichment of work, greater autonomy, or the possibility of personal development (Hall, 2004).

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### Studies

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#### Research methodology

The evolution of a career that assigns the status of career ownership to a specific individual entails the need for subjective understanding and evaluation (Cybal-Michalska, 2013). Subjective assessment of a career in the present reality takes on an increasingly important role. On the other hand, it is also worth considering the proof of the reliability of career exemplification through satisfaction. In ensuring objectivity in evaluating professional careers, it seems important to check the relationship between subjective and objective career parameters. To check this correlation in the current, Polish conditions and the new subjective approach to careers, an original study was conducted, in which the following hypotheses were verified:

H1: There is a positive correlation between objective and subjective career measures.

H2: The objective indicators of a professional career influence satisfaction with one's career.

In order to verify the hypotheses, a study was conducted based on an online questionnaire addressed to employees in large and medium-sized enterprises in Poland. Responses were obtained from 190 respondents, of which 49% were women, and 51% were men. 14% of respondents seniority is more than 20 years, 21% are between 10 and 20 years old. The largest group, constituting 32% of the population, had between 5 and 10 years of professional experience. 36% of the employees held managerial functions, of lower,

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average, or upper management level, and 46% held an expert or specialized position. The characteristics of the group in terms of position (which is also one of the objective measures of career development) and seniority are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Characteristics of the group being studied*

Variable	% of the group
<b>Type of position occupied</b>	
Upper management position	8.42%
Middle management position	12.63%
Lower management position	15.27%
Position not related to management (specialist)	45.79%
Position not related to management (basic/operational)	17.89%
<b>Seniority</b>	
Less than 2 years	10.5%
From 2 to 5 years	22.6%
From 5 to 10 years	32.1%
From 10 to 20 years	20.6%
Over 20 years	14.2%

Source: author's own work.

All analyses were prepared in the SPSS statistical application, version 27. The significance level adopted was equal to  $\alpha = 0.05$ . The correlations between the variables were analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient  $r$ . In order to fulfill the linear regression assumptions regarding the normality of the dependent variable's and the independent variables' distributions, a logarithmic transformation of the distributions of these variables that deviate from the normal distribution was performed. Given that the tendency in all these distributions was negative, first the distributions were reflected in positively skewing distributions. Due to that reflection, the Beta values in the regression analyses were analyzed in reverse (a negative value as a positive one, a positive as a negative) for the transformation of only one variable, and in the same way as if the transformation had been performed on

a dependent and an independent variable. In order to examine whether or not gender and seniority were significant moderators for particular relations in the regressions, the independent variables were centered by means of centration based on standardization of a variable's results.

## Measures

**Subjective measure in career evaluation:** To examine the subjectively perceived success of career and career development, the career satisfaction scale (CSS), authored by Greenhaus, Parasuraman, Wormley (1990) was used. It consists of five items evaluating an individual's satisfaction with their progress in terms of promotions, income, and competence development, but also the professional success perceived or the professional goals achieved. The respondents provided answers on Likert's 7-grade scale. This survey is a commonly used tool for studying careers, and is recognized as one of the best measures available in literature (Judge et al., 1995).

The subjective measure in research is therefore represented by satisfaction with a career in the five areas.

**Objective measure in career evaluation:** In order to examine career development objectively, an index has been designed that concerns an employee's promotions, their remuneration, participation in training and development undertakings, and the position held. The questionnaire defining objective measures consisted of single-choice questions relating to quantifiable aspects of career development. The respondents were asked how often their remuneration is increased, how fast they get promoted, how many times per year they participate in training courses, and what position they hold from the lowest operational, specialized, and managerial work position, taking into account division into lower, average, and upper management level.

## Results

The results of the analysis of the correlation between the subjective and objective measures are presented in Table 2. Each objective measure of development was correlated positively with its subjective equivalent ( $p < 0.050$  for all analyses), and thus the subjective and objective professional

**Table 2**  
*Analysis of the correlations between the subjective and objective measures of development (cumulatively and separately)*

Subjective measures	$r$	Objective measures
Subjective measure of development (cumulatively)	0.36***	Objective measure of development (cumulatively)
<b>Particular items to the scale</b>		<b>Particular items to the scale</b>
Satisfaction with professional success	0.46***	Position held
Satisfaction with remuneration	0.36**	Wage rise frequency
Satisfaction with promotions	0.19**	Promotion frequency
Satisfaction with new skill development	0.17*	Frequency of participation in training

Note.  $r$  – Pearson's correlation coefficient; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.010$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ .

Source: author's own work.

success are co-existing variables. The value of the correlation coefficient indicates a statistically significant co-relation of poor or moderate strength. The higher/lower the objective development measure (both cumulatively and separately), the higher /lower the subjective development measure, which makes it possible to confirm H1.

To verify whether or not, based on the values of the objective measures of development, the values of the subjective parameters could be predicted, a series of multidimensional regression analyses was performed, where the dependent variables were particular subjective measures of development. The predictors in each model were: objective measure of development (cumulatively, or separately), gender, and seniority, (less than ten years and more than ten years), interaction between the objective measure and gender, and interaction between the objective measure and seniority. For particular variables relating to the objective measures of development, a logarithmic transformation of the distributions was performed, due to the skewing, or kurtosis being too big. The models were prepared by means of the stepwise method.

The final models explained 3% to 14% of the values of the dependent variables. In almost all models, the only significant predictor was the given measure of objective development, and therefore H2, which refers to the impact of the objective measures on career

satisfaction, was partly confirmed due to a weak, but statistically significant co-relation. As shown in Table 3, along with the increase in the total value of the objective measure by 1%, the total value of the subjective measure grew by 0.05 of a unit ( $p < 0.001$ ). The higher the position held, the higher the satisfaction with the professional success achieved ( $p = 0.006$ ). A change in the value of the variable related to the frequency of wage increases by 1% meant that a change could be predicted in the value of the satisfaction with remuneration variable by 0.01 of a unit ( $p < 0.001$ ). Together with an increase in the training participation frequency value by one unit, the value of satisfaction with developing new skills grew by 0.31 of a unit ( $p = 0.019$ ). In the models described, no interaction between the variables relating to the objective measures of development and gender and seniority was observed (the dependencies analyzed were significantly similar for both genders, and for people with shorter and longer seniority). In the model regarding satisfaction with promotions, two significant predictors were left – promotion frequency, and interaction between this variable and gender. Together with an increase in the value of the promotion frequency variable by 1%, the value of the satisfaction with promotions variable grew by 0.006 of a unit ( $p = 0.013$ ). Further studies showed that the dependence between this predictor and the dependent variable was higher for women ( $p = 0.030$ ).

**Table 3**

*Analyses of the, multidimensional linear regression for the subjective measure of development (cumulatively and individually)*

Dependent variable: Subjective measure of development (cumulatively); F(1; 188) = 29.59; p < 0.001				
Predictor	$\beta$	SE	p	R2
Objective measure of development (cumulatively)	-5.05	0.93	< 0.001	0.14
Dependent variable: Satisfaction with professional success achieved; F(1; 188) = 7.59; p = 0.006				
Predictor	$\beta$	SE	p	R2
Position held	-0.55	0.20	0.006	0.04
Dependent variable: Satisfaction with remuneration; F(1; 188) = 23.15; p < 0.001				
Predictor	$\beta$	SE	p	R2
Wage rise frequency	-0.95	0.20	< 0.001	0.11
Dependent variable: Satisfaction with promotions; F(1; 188) = 4.92; p = 0.008				
Predictor	$\beta$	SE	p	R2
Promotion frequency	-0.56	0.22	0.013	0.05
Promotion frequency * gender	0.27	0.12	0.030	
Dependent variable: Satisfaction with developing new skills; F(1; 188) = 5.60; p < 0.019				
Predictor	$\beta$	SE	p	R2
Frequency of participation in training	0.31	0.13	0.019	0.03

Note.  $\beta$  – beta coefficient value; SE – standard error.

Source: author’s own work.

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## Conclusions

The analysis of the research material collected indicates a correlation between the objective and subjective measures of professional careers. The strongest relationship exists between subjectively perceived professional success and the associated satisfaction, and the position occupied by the surveyed person. There is also a statistically significant correlation between the interaction between satisfaction with the goals achieved associated with remuneration and wage rise frequency, which may indicate a developing career, increasing responsibility, or job enrichment.

Apart from the proven simultaneous occurrence of the variables, there is also a cause-effect relationship between them. This makes it possible, to some extent, to predict satisfaction with one's career based on changes in the objective indicators of the professional career. Seniority was not demonstrated to be a significant moderator of the relationships between the career measures, and, on the other hand, in the case of gender, it only diversified the interactions in terms of promotions. For women, the frequency of promotion better explained the satisfaction with achieving goals related to promotion than for men.

## Summary

At the moment, the progressing changes in the professional environment require a multi-contextual approach to careers and their measurement. The binary formulation of a career, namely in objective and subjective terms, makes it possible to comprehensively analyze and evaluate the achievements of an individual. The choice of the parameters for evaluating a professional career should take account of a broad spectrum of factors, such as the specificity of the group being studied, its characteristic features, or the context of the problem area being addressed by the author. In addition, awareness of the limitations both of the objective and subjective measures is necessary.

In general, the main purpose of the studies is their reliability and objectivity, making it possible to credibly present the results and conclusions resulting from the studies conducted, without bias. The common career measures used to date, such as remuneration or the position held, both because of the evolution of the career paradigm and new models, and the impossibility to determine fixed comparative standards among diverse industries and professions, hinder a reliable evaluation of the progression of a career. Professional development is a continuous and progressive process, and one contemporary reflection of professional success is having valuable competences and their constant evaluation, and not just the power to give instructions to others. An individual's view of themselves is present in what they do, and for this reason the current understanding of a career highlights the importance of the subjective parameters.

Dynamic changes in career models imply the need to update the methods of measurement, while main-

taining the objectivity of evaluation. In addition to the contemporary approach to career, another aspect that gives research originality is the focus on the work environment in Central and Eastern Europe.

Confirmation of the relationship between objective and subjective measures means that they can be considered as equivalents, without disqualifying any of them in the process of making a reliable career assessment.

The objective and subjective career measures are correlated and complement and explain each other. They are used to measure the same construct but from another perspective. Conditioning a career and its effects by means of many factors creates a diversified evaluation framework, which, in consequence makes it impossible to indicate a universal, more significant and reliable measurement method. The criteria chosen depend on the research context. The simultaneous occurrence of the variables demonstrated indicates, however, the justification of using one of two approaches to operationalize a professional career. An increase in the objective assessment value of a career is accompanied by an increase in the subjective satisfaction with the career. For this reason, in the process of measuring a professional career, these measures may substitute each other. Moreover, the conclusion may be that the use of subjective measures of career development meets the condition of an objective evaluation.

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