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## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CAREER STRATEGIES AND CAREER SUCCESS

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between career strategies and career success. The three dimensions that measured career strategies were enhancing promotability, strengthening external contacts, and improving image with superiors. Meanwhile, the dimension that measured career success was subjective career success. Data were gathered through questionnaires administered to employees at a manufacturing organisation (n=185). Correlation and regression analyses were used to examine the relationship between career strategies and career success. The results indicated that there were no relationship between career strategies and career success. Only two of the career strategy dimensions were positively correlated with career success, namely strengthening external contacts and improving image with superiors. The multi-regression results suggested that improving image with superiors was the most important factor in influencing individual's career success. The findings were discussed and recommendations for future research were also addressed.

**Keywords:** *Career success; career strategies.*

### ABSTRAK

*Kajian ini melihat hubungan antara strategi kerjaya dan kejayaan kerjaya. Tiga dimensi digunakan untuk mengukur strategi kerjaya iaitu promotability, strengthening external contacts dan improving image with superior. Sementara dimensi yang mengukur kejayaan kerjaya adalah kejayaan kerjaya subjektif. Data dikumpul melalui soal selidik dan diedar dalam organisasi pembuatan (n=185). Analisa korelasi dan regresi digunakan untuk melihat*

*hubungan antara strategi kerjaya dan kejayaan kerjaya. Keputusan kajian mendapati tidak wujud hubungan antara strategi kerjaya keseluruhan dan kejayaan kerjaya. Namun begitu, dari aspek dimensi strategi kerjaya, dua dimensi mempunyai hubungan korelasi yang positif dengan kejayaan kerjaya, iaitu "strengthening external contacts" dan "improving image with superior". Keputusan regresi berganda menunjukkan dimensi "improving image with superior" sebagai faktor paling penting yang mempengaruhi kejayaan kerjaya. Penemuan kajian dan cadangan untuk kajian lanjut juga turut dibincangkan.*

## INTRODUCTION

Career success is a topic that has received lots of attention from many researchers. Many articles and research studies have been published recently concerning the issue of individual career success. Researchers such as Gould and Penley (1984); Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley (1990); Lau and Pang (2000); and Nabi (1999; 2001; 2003) are some of the experienced scholars in this field, particularly regarding individual career success. Although there are lots of articles related to career success that have been published, critics on those topics are limited to the relationship among variables. Despite the critics on the understanding of the determinants and consequences of career success being limited, research on the relationship among variables is an interesting context for most researchers. Since research on career success is not limited to any one predictor, demographic variables, human capital attributes, organisational sponsorship, and others have all been explored related the topic with a wide range of results. Nabi (1999; 2001; 2003) studied the relationship between human capital attributes (individual ability, education, and training), organisational structures, policies, and practices (organisational size, job security, and internal career progression), individual career strategies (social support strategies), and career success. Gould and Penley (1984) investigated the relationship between career strategies and career success. Meanwhile, Lau and Pang (2000) revealed the relationship between individual's career goals, career strategies, and career success.

From the review of these career success literatures, the most commonly investigated variable was individual's career strategies. Researchers such as Gould and Penley (1984), Burke, Divinagracia, and Mamo (1998), Lau and Pang (2000), and Nabi (1999; 2001; 2003)

viewed individual's career strategies as an important element for an individual to be successful. This is because career strategies such as creating external networking may be utilised by an individual to seek more career opportunities outside the organisation, which can help them advance in their future careers. According to Gould and Penley (1984), successful utilisation of career strategies would result in the efficient achievement of careers. For example, seeking guidance from mentor (one type of career strategy) may help an individual to enhance his career by obtaining valuable feedback and ideas, which would likely help the individual to subjectively succeed in their careers.

On this basis, the importance of career strategies toward career success was indicated by the work of many researchers such as Gould and Penley (1984), Burke *et al.* (1998), Nabi (1999; 2001; 2003), Lau and Pang (2000). The importance had been proven by them based on planned and systematic research activities. Therefore, the present research study had sought to reexamine the relationship between career strategies and career success. The following section will discuss the issue of career success. Specifically, the objectives of this study were: (1) to determine the relationship between career strategies and career success and (2) to investigate the most important career strategies that are related to career success.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Career Success

Poon (2004) defined career as an evolving sequence of a person's work experience over time. The accumulation of achievements arising from this work experience is career success (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). Career researchers such as Gattiker (1985), Judge, Cable, Boudreau, and Bretz (1995), and Nabi (1999; 2001; 2003) generally conceptualised that career success could be divided into objective and subjective forms. Objective career success is assessed by extrinsic measures such as job title, salary, or promotion (Lau & Shaffer, 1999). Meanwhile, subjective career success is defined as individual's feeling or perception of accomplishment and satisfaction with their careers (Judge *et al.*, 1995).

According to Nabi (2001), the significance of investigating subjective career success should not be neglected by researchers since it is

more complex to understand and totally different from objective career success. Prior researchers such as Nabi (1999; 2001) and Poon (2004) revealed that objective and subjective career success are two distinct concepts and weakly related to each other. For example, many individuals, despite having low salaries and status, can still feel satisfied with their careers (Nabi, 1999; 2001) due to other factors such as good working environment. This means that it is not necessary for individuals to have high salaries to achieve high level of subjective career success. Therefore, this researcher could either focus on objective or subjective career success, since evidence from Nabi's (2001) study showed that subjective career success is weakly related to objective career success. Hence, this study had only focused on subjective career success. Thus, the phrase *career success* will be used in the following discussion and defined as individual's perceptions and satisfaction against their career achievement.

### **Career Strategies**

According to Counsell and Popova (2000), the literature on career strategies found its origin back in the 1950s, with the studies of Dalton in 1951. Dalton (1951) showed that United States (U.S.) managers have engaged in several strategic career behaviours, such as joining social groups that could improve their career prospects. However, interest in career strategies had been more recognised in the last 20 years, where Gould and Penley (1984) were the pioneers on this topic. They also had defined career strategies as behaviours that could be utilised by individuals to decrease the time required and uncertainty environment to meet their career goals.

Drawing on the past conceptual frameworks, as indicated by Gould and Penley (1984), Nabi (1999; 2001; 2003), Counsell and Popova (2000), and Lau and Pang (2000), career strategies could incorporate a broad range of general tactics. For example, Gould and Penley (1984) proposed that Career Strategies Inventory (CSI) should consist of seven effective career strategies (creating opportunities, extending work involvement, self-nominating, seeking career guidance, networking, opinion conformity, and other enhancement) for achieving career success. However, Lau and Pang (2000) comprised these seven strategies into three broad categories, namely enhancing promotability, improving image with superiors, and strengthening external contacts, which was used in this present study. The definitions of each of the career strategy dimensions are outlined as follows:

**Table 1**  
Three Types of Career Strategies

Career strategies	Activities
Enhancing promotability	Creating opportunities by skills development, continuing education, and building internal network.
Improving image with superiors	Improve self-image through seeking superior's career guidance, working longer hours, or conforming to supervisor's expectations.
Strengthening external contacts	Enhancing career opportunities by participation in various external organisations such as professional bodies, trade associations, social organisations and executive search firms.

Note: Data derived from Lau and Pang's (2000) career management study.

### **Career Strategies and Career Success**

The suggestion for the setting of career strategies draws on the study of Gould and Penley (1984) which proposed that individuals who made greater use of career strategies were advancing their careers more than these who were not. This suggestion is aligned with Lau and Pang's (2000) study that individuals who have specific strategies would perform more successfully than those without career strategies.

According to Lau and Pang (2000), enhancing promotability is one of the tactics to create opportunities by obtaining marketable skills, continuing skills development, enhancing internal network, and seeking out experiences, which would form a broad base for career advancement. An individual with several marketable skills such as leadership skills and critical thinking skills will tend to get more attention easily from employers, and climb up the ladder faster than the others who lack such marketable skills.

Beside that, prior researchers such as Chang (2002) and Nabi (2003) revealed that the action of continually developing skills, knowledge, and expertise is needed to prepare individuals for career opportunities that may arise in future. This is because only with knowledge, skills, and expertise aligned with the need of the labour market, will ensure an individual's career progression. For example, with the expedition

of the information technologies (IT) era, the new IT tools such as computer software and hardware keep changing rapidly, the skills and knowledge of employees needs to be updated or else their skills in the IT field may become obsolete. If employees fail to update themselves with the current trends of knowledge needed by the employers, there is a possibility that the employees may face slow promotion and tardy salary advancement. Ultimately, employees will be dissatisfied with their career achievement.

Besides building the internal contacts within an organisation, Lau and Pang (2000) also suggested that developing a system of contacts outside the organisation is likely to enhance an individuals' efforts in achieving career success. According to Lau and Pang (2000), one of the tactics to strengthen the external contacts is to participate in external social groups, such as professional bodies, rotary clubs, political associations, and others. This strategy is useful especially to those who are constantly in job searching for better career opportunities. This point had been supported by Van Emmerik (2004) and Eddleston, Baldrige, and Veiga (2004), who claimed that individuals who have multiple contacts could aid in the development of their careers in various ways. Through participating in such social groups, employees can expand their network and create significant relationships with related people, such as the Chief Executive Officers (CEO), General Managers, or employees of other companies. The result of such relationships reveals the possibility of getting valuable career opportunities and information, which in turn could likely be related to rapid achievement of career success.

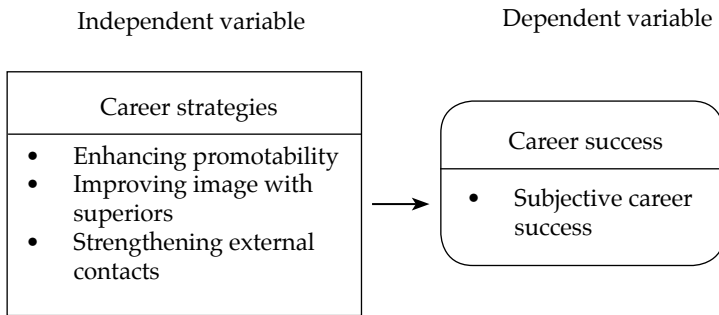
Based on the study of Lau and Pang (2000) also, improved image with superiors is a strategy to convey a positive and acceptable image towards superiors. The action to improve image includes making superiors aware of employees' accomplishments, working for longer hours, and conforming to superior's expectations (Lau & Pang, 2000). Orpen (1996) exhibited that generating an image of professionalism is important to many employees in order for them to improve their chance for promotion and career advancement. This is because superiors have the power to make the promotion decision based on their own judgment towards an employee's performance. Therefore, superiors have the authority to not promote an employee if the employee's performance does not meet their expectations. However, superiors may have a positive impression towards employees if these employees show their initiative and enthusiasm toward work. The result of such positive image may result in rapid promotion and

salary increment, which could ultimately enrich an individual's sense of success.

In short, career literature studied by Gould and Penley (1984), Orpen (1996), Counsell and Popova (2000), Lau and Pang (2000), and Nabi (1999; 2001; 2003) had proven that career strategies are related to career success. In addition, researchers such as Lau and Pang (2000) suggested that individuals could engage in several career strategies, such as strengthened internal and external contacts, and improve image with superiors and skills development to facilitate their career achievement, but the key idea being, individuals should learn to take an active role in the management of their careers. This is because to formulate career strategies is not an easy task as it needs time, energy, and cost investment. Hence, when individuals have specific career strategies that suit their needs, it will in turn assist them help to enhance their career insight and be able to guide them towards success.

### Theoretical Framework

From the literature review, the framework for this study is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1**  
Theoretical framework of individual career strategies and career success

## METHODS

### Respondents

Participants of this study were employees of a manufacturing organisation located in the Northern state of Malaysia. A total

of 280 questionnaires were distributed to respondents by self-administered technique. Respondents were given 20 minutes to answer the questionnaires. Of the 280 sets of questionnaire, 185 usable questionnaires were returned and analysed, which constituted 66.07% of the sample.

## **Measures**

This study used a 14-item series of statements that was originally derived from Lau and Pang's (2000) study. The coefficient alpha values for this instrument were 0.60 to 0.73. The 14-items of career strategies covered three dimensions, which are enhancing promotability, improving image with superiors, and strengthening external contacts. Meanwhile, questions regarding career success were measured using five-item scales of Perceived Career Success (PCS) developed by Greenhaus *et al.* (1990). The PCS instrument is the most widely used measure with a consistently high reliability result of 0.88 in previous empirical studies (Greenhaus *et al.*, 1990; Judge *et al.*, 1995; Nabi, 1999; 2001; 2003).

## **Data Analysis**

Factor Analysis was initially carried out to verify the internal validity of the measures. From the result of factor analysis, a reliability test for independent variables and dependent variables were conducted. Subsequently, Pearson Correlation Analysis was used to examine the relationship between the independent variable (career strategies) and the dependent variable (career success). Furthermore, Multiple Regression Analysis was carried out to determine the relationship between dimensions of the independent variable and dependent variable.

# **FINDINGS**

## **Factor Analysis**

The Factor Analysis with varimax rotation was undertaken to validate the underlying structure of career strategies. The rotated component matrix of 14 items with three factors was loaded at 0.55 in order to get the adequate valid items for further analysis. The rotation of career strategies' items produced three factors (refer Table 1) namely enhancing promotability (4 items), strengthening external contacts (4 items), and improving image with superiors (4 items).



The total variance explained 80.22% and KMO value is 0.76. Besides this, the reliability results showed that the overall Cronbach Alpha's value for career strategies and career success were at 0.80 and 0.87 respectively.

**Table 1**  
Varimax Rotated Factor Matrix Of Career Strategies

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
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Enhancing promotability			
• Acquiring marketable skills			
• Obtaining information about opening in my company	0.740		
• Building internal contacts and networks	0.746		
• Performing effectively in my job	0.747		
	0.585		
<hr/>			
Strengthening external contacts			
• Joining professional bodies		0.868	
• Joining trade associations		0.823	
• Joining social organisations		0.840	
• Maintaining contacts with search firms		0.572	
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Improving image with superiors			
• Working longer hours			0.712
• Making my boss aware of my accomplishments			0.628
• Seeking career guidance from supervisors			0.643
• Confirming to expectations of supervisors			0.587
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Eigenvalues	7.52		
Variances (%)	53.68	2.56	1.16
Cumulative variances (%)	53.68	18.27	8.27
Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO)	0.76	71.95	80.22
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### Profile of Respondents

The frequency analysis (see Table 2) revealed that 121 respondents (65.4%) out of the total of 185 were female, while 64 respondents

(34.6%) were male. The majority of respondents' age ranged between 25 to 34 years old (41.7%). In terms of educational achievement, 127 respondents (68.6%) had SPM, STPM, or Certificate qualification, while 30 respondents (16.2%) had a first degree. Beside that, 85.4% of the respondents were non-executive employees, while 14.6% were executive employees. A total of 124 respondents (67%) received a monthly income of less than RM1500.

**Table 2**  
Profile of Respondents

Demographic Characteristics		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	65	34.6
	Female	121	65.4
Age	Below 25 years	69	37.3
	25-29 years	36	19.5
	30-34 years	41	22.2
	35-39 years	26	14.1
	40-44 years	9	4.9
	45-49 years	2	1.1
	Above 50 years	2	1.1
Education level	SPM		
	STPM or Certificate	87	47.0
	Diploma	40	21.6
	Degree	23	12.4
	Master	30	16.2
	Others	4	2.2
Level of position	Executive level		
	Non-executive level	27	14.6
Monthly salary	Less than RM1500	158	85.4
	RM1501-RM2000	27	14.6
	RM2001-RM2500	6	3.2
	RM2501-RM3000	17	9.2
	RM3001-RM3500	6	3.2
	RM3501-RM4000	1	0.5

## Correlation and Multiple Regression

Table 3 exhibits the correlation results between dimensions of career strategies and career success. The correlation results revealed that career strategies do not have any significant relationships with career success. However, the correlation results revealed that two of the dimensions of career strategies were significantly correlated with career success, namely strengthening external contacts and improving image with superior. The coefficient value for strengthening external contacts was 0.175, while the coefficient value for improving image with superior was 0.159.

Meanwhile, Table 4 illustrates the multiple regression results of career strategies' dimensions and career success. The multiple regression results indicated that only 8.2% (R Square = 0.082) of the total variance in career success were significantly explained by the three dimensions of career strategies, namely enhancing promotability, strengthening external contact, and improving image with superior. Improving image with superior had the highest beta value of 0.227, which indicated that it is the most important factor for achieving career success. This signified that in order to achieve career success, greater effort in conforming to supervisors' expectation is needed.

**Table 3**  
Correlation Results of Career Strategies and Career Success

	1	2	3	4	5
1) Enhancing promotability	1	.254**	.483**	.806**	-.060
2) Strengthening external contacts		1	.197**	.700**	.175**
3) Improving image with superiors			1	.689**	.159*
4) Career strategies				1	.111
5) Career success					1

\*  $p \leq 0.05$  (1-tailed)

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$  (1-tailed)

**Table 4**  
Multiple Regression Results of Career Strategies Dimensions on Career Success

Variable Entered	Career Success						
	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardised Coefficients	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.977		2.977	0.306		9.173	0.000
Enhancing promotability	-0.205		-0.205	0.078	-0.217	-2.620	0.010*
Strengthening external contact	0.134		0.134	0.054	0.186	2.510	0.013*
Improving image with superior	0.241		0.241	0.087	0.227	2.779	0.006*
R Square = 0.082							
F = 5.358							
R = 0.286							

\*p≤0.05

## DISCUSSION

The correlation results of this present study showed that career strategies were not associated with career success. This suggested that career strategies are not an important predictor to career success. This finding is not aligned with Chang's (2002) study, who found that career strategies are positively correlated with career satisfaction, that is career success. A possible reason to these differences might be caused by the sample of the study. In Chang's (2002) study, he used information technology (IT) professionals as the sample and this present study used manufacturing employees as the sample of study. As we know, working in the IT field is very challenging compared to professionals in other occupations. This is because rapidly changing and developing IT tools and information has caused IT professionals to face an increasing need to continually master new skills and expand their knowledge portfolio. Therefore, they need to obtain skills and knowledge that are suited to the new era of technology changes as a means to advance their career success. Hence, IT professionals need to use career strategies such as continuing skills development, extending work involvement, and others to attain rewards or career advancement. This revealed that Chang's (2002) sample, which consisted of IT professionals, have strong need to strategise their career in a professional manner. Meanwhile, the sample of this present study consisted of employees who are not involved in a professional job like IT professionals. They do not need to use much career strategies to advance their career success as they are in the manufacturing sector. This has resulted in the difference between the present study and Chang's (2002) study.

The correlation results also revealed that only enhancing promotability was not correlated with career success. This findings differ slightly with the literature acknowledged in this study regarding the link between enhancing promotability and career success. Furthermore, this result has contradicted Lau and Pang's (2000) study. Their study found that enhancing promotability is the strategy most often used by respondents as a means to attain career success. There are several potential reasons causing the differences between the present study and Lau and Pang's (2000) study. Firstly, those who were subjectively successful in this study may not use enhancing promotability as a means to achieve career success. This is because they do not perceive any need or benefit in doing so since there are others career strategies, such as working longer hours, confirming to supervisor's expectation, and developing external contacts, which might be more beneficial

to them compared to enrolling in further education, obtaining marketable skills, and building internal contacts. Moreover, enrolling in further education and obtaining marketable skills require them to invest enormous amount of time, energy, and money. However, 67% of the respondents in this present study received income that is less than RM1500 and most of them work as operators that have to work for longer hours. This translates into them having limited time, energy, and money to be involved in enhancing promotability strategies. Thus, they tend to get involved in other strategies that could save time, energy and money, which that could still help them to receive similar career outcomes as others who are involved in enhancing promotability.

On the other hand, the correlation results showed that strengthening external contacts was positively related to individual's career success. Part of this finding is similar to Van Emmerik's (2004) study, who found that developmental network diversity (also known as external contacts) is positively correlated with career success. This indicated that those employees who frequently used career strategies reported feeling more successful in their careers than those who did not. This is because developing a system of contacts outside the organisations, such as being involved in professional bodies, trade associations, social organisations, and executive search firms would likely enhance one's mobility and chances to obtain more favourable career advancement opportunities. Through participating in such social groups, employees can expand their network and create significant relationships with related people in order to obtain valuable resources and information, which in turn would likely be related to rapid achievement of career success.

Besides that, the correlation results revealed that improving image with superiors is positively connected with career success. The multipl regression results also indicated that improving image with superiors is the most important factor in explaining career success rather than other career strategy dimensions because of the highest beta value of 0.227. This finding is parallel to Gould and Penley (1984), Orpen (1996), and Lau and Pang (2000), who claimed that improving image with superiors is positively related to career success. This means individuals who were frequently involved in such strategies tend to have greater a feeling of success. This is because they could convey a positive and acceptable image towards superiors that would help them build up positive impressions and attract their superior's attention. Once superiors favour and agree with employees' efforts, they tend to give pay raises and promotions to those they like than

those they do not. The result of such positive image may result in rapid promotion and salary increment, which could ultimately enrich an individual sense of success. Hence, it showed that improving image with superiors would be positively associated with career success.

## LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Two limitations have been identified in the current study. Firstly, the present study concentrated only on employees in a manufacturing organisation. Therefore, the results may not be generalised to other organisations or industries as they might have different management systems, policies, and cultures. Secondly, the current study was limited to one independent variable (career strategies) only. The low R Square of the model suggests that the independent variable chosen for this study is not sufficiently adequate to explain an individual's career success. There might be other variables that are contributing factors to career success. Therefore, further researchers may need to extend the framework proposed in the present study by including other measurement of organisational career management interventions such as career prospect, job security, and career development opportunities that could influence individual career success. This would enhance our understanding of how organisations manage their human resource to facilitate employees' career success.

## CONCLUSION

This study has successfully attained two research objectives, that are (1) to find out the relationship between career strategies and career success and (2) to examine the most important career strategy dimension that is related to career success. From the correlation results, it was found that career strategies were not related to career success. However, the multiple regression results indicated that improving image with superiors was the most important dimension in explaining career success. Thus, this study suggests that to have greater career success, individuals need to be involved in good image building.

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