

## Are You a Success? Perceptions of Career Growth in the Modern Workplace

A Study about Perception of Success in regards to Career Movement

Avery Thomas, Master of Arts Candidate

Human Dimensions of Organizations, The University of Texas at Austin

### Introduction:

The research done in this study explores the notions of vertical and horizontal career growth vis-à-vis how individuals perceive success. Traditional definitions of success require that employees try to move upwards into managerial roles, though it seems clear that these traditional definitions are being challenged by a new generation of employees and the new career structures that are available to them. This study will endeavor to find out whether there is a difference in the perception of success between those who favor horizontal development and those who favor vertical development, across multiple industries and career types.

### Methods:

- A literature review of gender differences in the workplace, existing case studies, and personality perspectives into the topic.
- A qualitative study about the phenomenon of workplace success consisting of twelve semi-structured remote interviews with participants interested in perception of success.

### Literature Cited:

- Dyke, L., & Murphy, S. (2006). How We Define Success: A Qualitative Study of What Matters Most to Women and Men. *Sex Roles*, 55, 357-371.
- Fels, A. (2004). Do Women Lack Ambition. *Harvard Business Review*, 82 (4), 50-60.

### Results:

The study's findings highlighted several key concepts about perceived success, including work-life balance, minimum career height, social pressures, and horizontal growth. Each of the participants' insights were eye-opening to me on both a professional and personal level. Different backgrounds, age, phase of life, levels of education, workplace expectations, and length of time spent in their current role all contributed to the wide breadth of responses I received.

*Five Major Findings that Contribute to Success:*



### Conclusions:

As seen by the findings of the study, while success can take on a staggering variety of definitions, many of them build off of the same fundamental underlying principles. Among these include a desire for work-life balance, internal pressures such as a minimum career level and outside social pressures from peers and others.

The most surprising conclusion from my interviews was that, while it can seem that people that hold higher positions equate money and prestige with success, this is not always the case. There is much more commonality between employees of all levels than I had originally hypothesized.

### Acknowledgments:

A heart-felt thank you to my family, loved ones, and current employer that has helped support me during this chapter of my life. I appreciate my fellow classmates, HDO faculty and staff for their ever so eloquent insight and discussion over the course of the program. Finally, a very special thank you to the participants of this study.

### Contact Information:

Avery Thomas  
[avthomas@utexas.edu](mailto:avthomas@utexas.edu)  
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/averythomas/>