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THE FIRST JOB EXPERIENCE AND ITS CAREER IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the findings and specific implications in terms of personnel policy of some career development research which considers the longitudinal effects of first job experiences. The basic premise is that the initial job experiences and attitudes of young people are critical in shaping their ultimate employment experience. Recommendations offer specific human resource activities which can ensure that the young person gets the most out of his or her early career.

THE FIRST JOB EXPERIENCE AND ITS CAREER IMPLICATIONS

In some recently completed research¹, the author found the first job characteristics of youth during the early part of their career to be important in explaining their later employment success. Career aspirations as well as background factors were also found to be critical at the time of the first job experience. In this article, after discussing the background of the research and the theoretical model, some of the findings that have particular implications for personnel are outlined, to be followed in each case by recommendations in terms of appropriate career development activities.

Background of the Research

The study from which the ensuing first job effects are recounted was supported by the W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. The data were drawn from the National Longitudinal Surveys (NLS), a massive study of the labor market experience of four cohorts of the United States civilian population. Only the two youth cohorts were examined, each representing a national probability sample of approximately 5,000 individuals. The NLS data were particularly appropriate for the study since they represent a source of early labor market information on young people whose characteristics, early job experiences, and attitudes generated by or apart from job experiences can be observed over time to see if they have any effect on subsequent employment experience. Finally, not all youngsters in the total sample were used. Rather, the study was designed for employed, out-of-school, relatively inexperienced first jobholders. Therefore, any significance

¹The study, Building A Career: The Effect of Initial Job Experiences and Related Attitudes on Later Employment, was supported by the W. E. Upjohn Institute. The author naturally assumes full responsibility for the contents herein.

to be attached to the findings is to be established only with respect to this sample. Casual jobs held while attending school, for example, are excluded from the analysis.

Career Development Model

The basic career development model is presented in Figure 1. It does not include socioeconomic background factors which create the foundation for the model. These factors will be presented in the discussion of the findings of the study. The model, then, incorporates only work-related variables which in the author's view are particularly treatable through career development adaptations. Its basic premise is that initial job experiences and attitudes of young people are critical in shaping their ultimate employment experience. It incorporates longitudinal data such that essentially snapshots are taken of the sample at three different times in a youth's early career. The interval separating the early and late periods is nearly ten years, specifically between 1966 and 1975.

Early Period

Upon termination of formal schooling, whether the circumstances be favorable or unfavorable, most young people obtain employment at varying levels of occupational status and wage rates. They also remain with their initial employment for varying periods of time. The first job is likely to produce a variety of attitudinal reactions, many of which are dependent on the quality of that first job. For example, if the work is incidental or "secondary" in character, reactions are likely to be unfavorable. Other attitudes towards the youth's career, for example his or her aspirations or motivation to work, are formed prior to the first job, although they certainly are affected by it. It is expected that both initial job experiences and attitudes affect the level of satisfaction one gets from one's early employment experience.

Middle Period

The experiences and attitudes from the early period carry over into the middle period. An important concern at this point is whether the youngster has stayed with the initial job or changed jobs. Further, the level of satisfaction relative to the current job may have changed depending upon whether the original job has been retained or whether the youth has experienced some job mobility. Certainly these considerations are largely affected by the nature of the initial job experience and the career attitudes associated with it. Another concern in the middle period is whether the specific job attitudes from the early period get transformed into generalized dispositions towards work, expressed as a commitment to the work ethic.

Late Period

The late period contains the principal dependent variables of the study as the youth sample, now in its twenties or thirties, enters a more stable and hopefully more productive stage of its career. There are of course exceptions, for example as new entrants, particularly married women, come into the labor market or as people change jobs and careers. During this period the focus is on the occupational level and wages of one's work. It is naturally expected that the first job itself affects later employment success. Further, the attitudes produced by the first job have a combined or even separate effect on one's later work. Middle period job stability and satisfaction are positively related to later work experience. Moreover, it is hypothesized that the generalized work commitment of the middle period is critical in explaining later employment success.

Findings of the Study and Implications for Personnel

The analysis of the data proceeded on the basis of the theoretical model outlined above with the inclusion of a variety of demographic, educational, and

labor market factors which were thought to affect career development apart from work experiences. For example, it was expected that large differences would be found for both sex and race categories. Other demographic factors considered were age, socioeconomic status, marital status, education, intelligence, and world of work knowledge. The economic environment of work, for example, the period in the business cycle and the place and region of employment, were also incorporated.

Below the principal findings are outlined to be followed by direct implications for personnel activity. The focus will be on how to improve career development and employment, specifically, how to ensure that a young person gets the most out of his or her early career.

1. There is no substitute for obtaining a good first job as the one way to insure success in employment in later years, particularly with respect to occupational status. Obtaining a low-level first job is inauspicious in terms of later employment except that one can usually count on gaining some ground. Finally, the first job obtained by a youngster is largely determined by his or her background, particularly education.

Recommendation:

Once a youth finishes school, all institutions of our society that have anything to do with youth should be aligned to insure that the youth obtains the best possible job at entry. We can begin this task by starting to collect information on new youth entrants to employment. Right now, we don't even know how many youth start work at any one point in time, where they locate their first job, or what work they're doing. This data could be critical, however, particularly if organized longitudinally. For example, career counselors would benefit greatly from knowing which jobs typically are taken as first jobs and among these, which ones have high or low turnover rates. Jobs with high turnover would then be examined to determine if they served a useful transition purpose or not.

Identified secondary jobs should be isolated for redesign. Personnel managers should be held responsible for insuring that their jobs are useful and productive. Where subsidized jobs are created, as in public service employment, criteria for productiveness in work should be no less severe. It has been speculated that such criteria are met more adequately in the private sector due to the profit motive. Whether or not this be the case, private employers and unions should be considered partners with government in the provision of adequate entry-level employment for youth.

2. Elaborating upon the first finding, education is a critical background factor in accounting for initial job success. Unfortunately, the disadvantaged of the youth population, including the undereducated or drop-outs, as well as those in lower socioeconomic classes and blacks, start off with poorer jobs. However, their options are no better if they make a job change which will likely turn out unfavorably, presumably due to poor job search skills or simply limited opportunities. On the other hand, educated youth, being quite self-motivated, face challenge and responsibility in their first job as a result of which they continue to stay with their first employer, sustaining a relatively high degree of satisfaction and resultant commitment. As long as they don't make an unfavorable job change, their prospects for financial success in work remain bright.

Recommendation:

Employers tend to use schooling as a screening device, therefore youth should be widely encouraged to finish school, not only as a way to get a good job, but as a way to ensure later employment success. It is certainly practical to provide work experience and training to youth who are not academically inclined, but to the extent possible, such programs should not take the place of formal education. The latter is sufficiently important that it may pay in the long run to subsidize or provide some kind of incentive to youth to finish school while participating in work experience programs. Finally, since the more schooling a youth

gets after high school, the more motivated and committed he or she will be, postgraduate programs should be viewed by career counselors as viable alternatives to immediate job entry.

3. The only initial attitude that has a significant role in the career development model is aspirations. At the outset of a career, they tend to be negatively related to job level. Nevertheless, they can be critical in accounting for later employment success. The higher the aspirations the greater the chance for obtaining a high level job later on. In fact, they have no threshold above which their utility declines. Aspirations are so important that they constitute one definite way to overcome a low level first job with respect to later employment. The process is not automatic, however. Young women or undereducated youth, whose career opportunities are limited, do not tend to have high aspirations.

Recommendation:

Since aspirations are considered so critical to later work experience, every effort should be made to have the young person develop and sustain healthy career aspirations throughout his or her early career. Having relatively poor jobs initially, disadvantaged youth may find aspirations to constitute the one way to turn things around. Black youth fortunately start out with relatively high aspirations. Besides career education and counseling, big brother/big sister and other such volunteer programs demonstrating strong role models to disadvantaged youth are helpful in developing positive career aspirations. The television medium can also be helpful, as it has begun to be, in role modeling. Finally, it appears that there is no disutility to exaggerated aspirations - the higher the better. Therefore, parents and teachers, employers and friends should avoid the practice of totally discouraging so-called "impractical" aspirations.

4. There are unfortunately certain subgroups of the youth population who despite any kind of positive work disposition or experience nevertheless face severe inequity in the labor market. The most deprived group of all in terms of ultimate

wage discrimination is women. They not only suffer wage disparity at the outset of their career, but unlike any other group, their wage differential as compared to their categorical counterpart, young men, widens with time. Further, their career path is noteworthy for the lack of options available to them as they pursue their ambitions, which are expected to grow over the years. Black youth, particularly men, face substantial employment discrimination relative to whites, and this finding is especially tragic given their relatively high aspirations. It may be contended that these findings are largely influenced by the time period in question which, in the early period, precedes current aggressive affirmative action policy. Nevertheless, such public policy changes cannot truly guarantee equal access nor can they ensure that people who have been targets of discrimination will suddenly and automatically demonstrate the ability to take advantage of whatever access to opportunity may exist.

Recommendation:

In spite of the latter conclusion, for disadvantaged subgroups in terms of early labor market experience, there can be no substitute but to vigorously pursue and enforce equal employment opportunity guidelines and regulations. EEO policies are particularly indicated given that employment differentials occur throughout the career process even when background factors are controlled. The fact that labor market opportunities may have expanded for these disadvantaged subgroups in recent years does not lessen the need for our personnel system to assist in providing decent work experiences for all those who are so inclined regardless of race and sex.

5. If during the middle period of a youth's early career a youth changes jobs and becomes dissatisfied, an occurrence which might be precipitated by a low level, low tenured first job, then he or she will likely face negative consequences in terms of later wages as well as occupational status. This maladaptive mobility process is particularly severe for disadvantaged youth. However, college

trained, highly motivated older youth can also suffer from unsatisfactory job transitions.

Recommendation:

Career education components in school, in training programs, or even in subsidized employment should equip youngsters with job mobility skills so that they can learn to make successful transitions. Youth should receive instruction, for example, in applying job search skills to explore new situations. They should learn how to methodically evaluate a variety of career options. Personnel managers should be encouraged to support career growth through internal advancement programs, posting, and the like, as well as through careful assessment and recruitment at the front end. Finally, since the evidence from this study backs up the familiar "secondary labor market" hypothesis, a principal concern of personnel should be to encourage eradication or redesign of deadend jobs.

6. Due to any number of background factors, youth come to work with certain expectations and motivations. For the educated youth, the quality of the first job is positively associated with intrinsic motivation. This kind of motivation, which arises from challenge in the work being done, normally leads to tenure with the same employer and continued job satisfaction. These traits contribute to a positive commitment to the work ethic on the part of such youth.

Recommendation:

Career counselors and human resource managers - particularly recruiters - should never neglect to ask a young job candidate what he or she expects from a job. Jobs should then be suggested which conform as much as possible to the youth's motivations, within limits, acknowledging that the job finding process is a two-way street. Supervisors, if unaware of this psychological approach to work, should be oriented to it so as to provide their young subordinates with the most challenging work experiences available.

7. Beyond formal education, world of work knowledge can be instrumental in helping a youth find a productive first job and/or obtain gainful later employment.

Recommendation:

Career exploration programs, where they haven't already, should become part of the traditional curriculum in schools and should be incorporated into work experience and training programs.

8. With the exception of mid-term job satisfaction and early career aspirations, mentioned previously, none of the other attitudes measured in the study account for later employment success for the general youth population as a whole. Sub-group analyses found that middle class male youth who were dissatisfied with their low status jobs were able to locate more productive work later on. Further, for male and college-educated youth, there is some evidence that initial job satisfaction leads to commitment which leads to higher later wages. However, these attitudinal effects are relatively slight.

Recommendation:

It does not appear that resources would be well allocated if directed towards attitude change programs in place of career enrichment, for example. In fact, before initiating more attitude programs, except perhaps at high academic levels, it would seem necessary now to go back to a prior step and concentrate more on basic and applied attitudinal research. We have a good appreciation for what causes attitudes, but the next path, from attitudes to behavior is tenuous in the employment sector. Research would refine our measurement of such constructs as job satisfaction and commitment or utilize the more advanced indicators which have been developed but with the purpose of establishing the conditions wherein early work attitudes affect long term employment. Given the present study, the only attitude worth devoting considerable practical attention is aspirations.

Figure 1

The Basic Career Development Model

