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Research Topics in Career Success throughout Time: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract. *Since the 1960s, career success has been extensively studied from different angles. This paper aims to identify the main topics of interest covered by the literature throughout time frames defined based on the number of article citations. A Scopus database search was performed in November 2021, gathering 926 articles on career success that were analyzed in VOSviewer. The results show that several concepts were constant over the years, such as mentoring, mobility, income, education, gender, and culture, while other topics of interest were introduced more recently (e.g., career satisfaction, change, personality, networking, the link between the private and professional life, the relationship between objective and subjective career success). An understanding of historical career success research topics contributes to the development of future human resources strategies and policies.*

Keywords: career success, subjective, objective, human capital, career development, career path, leadership.

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Introduction

"What got you here won't get you there", Goldsmith (2007) said. An impressive number of papers have been published on the topic through the past six decades, and more are expected as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as shifts appeared within industries and career anchors (e.g., values, motivations (Schein, 1996)).

Carl Sagan (1980) noted, "You have to know the past to understand the present." By identifying and understanding the career success concepts, models, and influencing factors discussed in the existing literature, inspiration can be found for writing human resources strategies and policies, since some concepts and interconnections might still be valid in the present or future, even after critical events, while others need to be adapted to new requirements and expectations.

The impact of major world events (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic; political and military conflicts; economic pressures) on people's lives and careers is a matter of continuous analysis. For some, these circumstances result in psychological and/or physical trauma and financial challenges, others might consider their lives unchanged, while for the rest, they open new horizons for professional and/or personal development. Nonetheless, what it means to be successful, and the acceptance degree to the status quo (including career rewards, the balance between the professional and personal life, interaction models, etc.) are reevaluated. Consequently, the notion of success is a moving target, as it is not measured just in financial and social status terms, but also through other lenses at individual, family, and organizational level (Petkovski et al., 2022; Belas et al., 2022; Kelly, 2021;).

This paper aims to answer the research question: *What are the main topics of interest in career success throughout time?* by using a bibliometric analysis of the Scopus database search results. The research contributes to similar review papers by identifying the main topics of interest covered by the literature on career success published through the past six decades, considering the number of article citations as a basis for splitting the dataset into time frames.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: the second section provides an overview of career success research, including similar review papers; the third section describes the research methodology; the fourth section presents the findings resulting from cluster analysis; and the final section summarizes the results, the research contribution and provides ideas for further research.

Literature review

Career success is a personal perception of professional achievements or psychological outcomes (Judge and Bretz, 1994), which may change over time, especially when major events are happening (Blokker et al., 2019), depending on the people who are assessing it (Jaskolka et al., 1985). Research has shown career success from various perspectives, some papers offering guidelines for bringing it closer to career theory (Arthur et al., 2005). Career success knows periods in one's life when objective, extrinsic factors may have a greater impact (e.g., remuneration or promotion), while other times the subjective, intrinsic criteria are more important (e.g., job satisfaction) (Ismail et al., 2022; Shockley et al., 2016; Gattiker and Larwood, 1988; Judge and Bretz, 1994; Kotter, 1982). Nevertheless, the objective and subjective career success are positively related (Bray and Howard, 1980; Harrell, 1969; Judge and Bretz, 1994). They are important factors influencing the intention to join a company (Egerová et al., 2021; Samoliuk et al., 2022).

During the years, several variables modulated the evaluation and perception of career success, such as the sociodemographic, motivational, and human capital factors, as well as organizational variables (Judge et al., 1995; Ng et al., 2005). The sociodemographic factors explain the influence of age, gender, marital status, family structure, dependent responsibilities, etc. over career success (Gattiker and Larwood, 1988, 1989; Gould and

Penley, 1984), while the human capital factors refer to education, experience, tenure, performance evaluation, etc. (Whitely et al., 1991). Career success is also studied in terms of its relationship with one's personality traits (Seibert, Crant and Kraimer, 2001; Seibert et al., 1999; Boudreau and Boswell, 2001; Bateman and Crant, 1993; Yang and Chau, 2016). Judge and Bretz (1994) argued that job-influencing tactics negatively affect both extrinsic and intrinsic career success, being too oriented to self-promoting the competences and expertise on the job. The motivational variables consider work dedication, work centrality, ambition, etc. as predictors of career success outcomes (England and Whitely, 1990; Jędrzejczak-Gas and Wyrwa, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021), while organizational variables explain the influence the organization's size, ownership, industry, location, etc. have on career success (Cox and Harquail, 1991; Cox and Nkomo, 1991).

More recent papers have studied topics such as career adaptability, empowering leadership, career success antecedents and outcomes, remote work, as well as career shocks (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) (Mihalca et al., 2021), to name a few. Rudolph et al. (2017) performed a meta-analysis showing that career adaptability is associated with measures of adapting responses (e.g., career exploration, career planning, etc.), measures of adaptivity (e.g., personality traits, hope, etc.), measures of adaptation results (e.g., career satisfaction, job stress, income, etc.) as well as with age and education. Kim and Beehr (2018) highlighted the role of empowering leadership in facilitating job crafting behaviors, increasing the level of career commitment and satisfaction.

A taxonomy of career success outcomes was developed by Spurk et al. (2019), providing recommendations for approaches to studying career success theory, and for a more rigorous integration of career success antecedents and outcomes research. Pico-Saltos et al. (2021) carried out a bibliometric analysis on career success, looking at documents published in the 1990-2020 period, highlighting the exponential growth in the number of published papers and identifying the top contributor countries, the most cited authors, and documents, as well as constructing several VOSviewer networks looking at keywords and co-citations.

Bagdadli and Gianecchini (2019) stated that in the academic literature, with the exception of Rosenbaum (1984), there is no research on the connection of all the systems and processes of career management that an organization invests in and the resulting objective career success, finding that all previous research is split in isolated fragments of topics and published in various disciplinary areas. Thus, they propose a framework that connects the two concepts (i.e., organizational career management and objective career success), identifying *why* and *how* their relationship occurs and under *what* circumstances it is most effective, adding to the work of Cappelli and Keller (2014) that studied the practical aspects of the human resources department's well-guided investments in employees' development. Ng and Feldman (2014) performed a meta-analysis of subjective career success, identifying several predictors (e.g., traits, motivation, social, organizational) and some aspects which are not associated with it (i.e., the employees' background and skills).

As career success perspectives have been influenced by recent world events, Akkermans et al. (2021) suggest that career shocks (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) can have differential implications over time, while certain psychological characteristics might make them more manageable. Park et al. (2021) discussed the challenges working remotely creates for the employees' psychological well-being, pointing out ways human resource development professionals could support them.

Methodology

This paper aims to identify the main topics of interest covered by the literature on career success throughout time. Thus, a Scopus database search was performed in November 2021 for the "career success" term. The search considered the full timeline (i.e., 1960-November 2021), the presence of "career success" in the title, abstract and keyword sections, and included published journal articles and review papers in the Business and Economics subject areas, according to Equation 1.

searchQuery = TITLE-ABS-KEY("career success") AND SUBJAREA(BUSI OR ECON) AND DOCTYPE(ar OR re) AND SRCTYPE(j) AND PUBSTAGE(aip OR final) Eq. 1

The search resulted in 986 documents, of which 979 (926 articles and 53 review papers) have been deemed relevant for the objective of this paper.

The 979 documents have started to be published since 1968. As available in Figure 1, the 979 papers can be divided into three time frames based on the number of citations by publication year: (1) papers published in the 1968-1993 period (defined by having up to 200 citations per article), (2) papers published in the 1994-2009 period (having some articles with more than 1000 citations), and (3) papers published in the 2010-2021 period (with up to 250 citations per article).

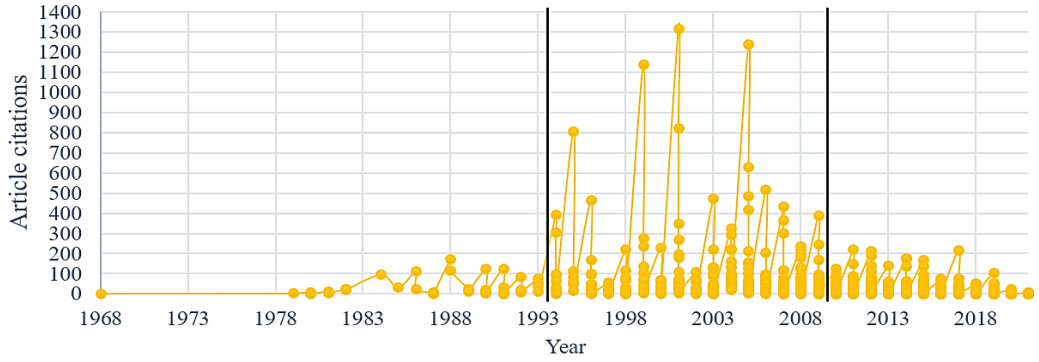


Figure 1. Citations by publication year for the 979 Scopus papers

Source: authors' research.

The research topics in career success covered by the 926 articles were identified through VOSviewer (software for creating and visualizing bibliometric networks) for: (1) the full dataset of 926 articles, (2) the articles pertaining to each of the three time frames in Figure 1, and (3) the 71 most cited articles in the full dataset of 926 articles (having 100 to 1319 citations).

The contribution of this paper to similar review papers was discussed in the Conclusions section.

Findings

Research topics covered by the 926 articles published in the 1968-2021 period

The main topics covered by the 926 articles (after eliminating the 53 review papers out of the total of 979 papers), are presented in Figure 2. The analysis was performed in VOSviewer,

considering the title and abstract fields. The circle size represents the number of item occurrences (the bigger, the more), and the relatedness of the items depends on the number of papers in which they occurred together.

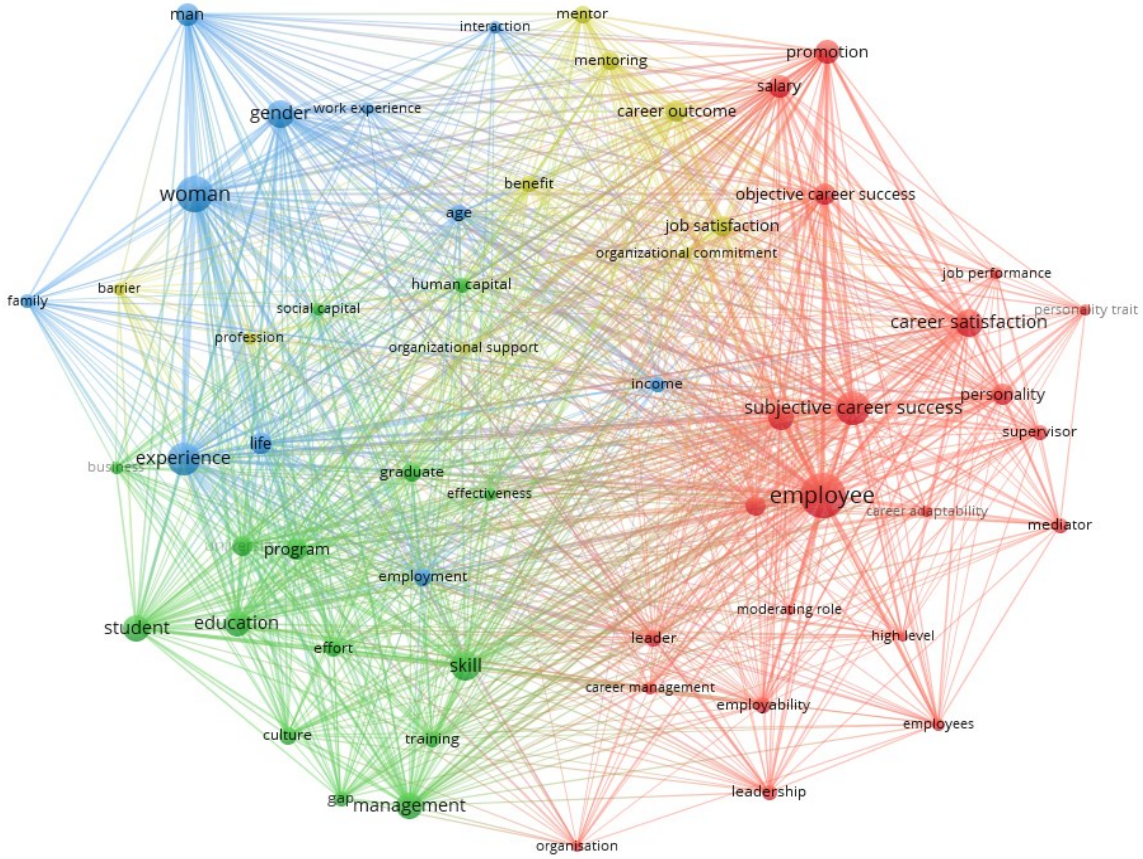


Figure 2. Main topics covered by the 926 articles, based on the title and abstract fields
Source: dataset analysis in VOSviewer.

Table 1 presents in more detail the clusters in Figure 2. Thus, one way of generalizing this information is to say that:

- cluster 1 (red) contains articles that are mainly related to the employee's experience within an organization when it comes to career development;
- cluster 2 (green) treats aspects preceding or sustaining a career, such as university education and training programs;
- cluster 3 (blue) looks at gender issues in relationship with employment;
- cluster 4 (yellow) dives deeper into the role of mentoring in job satisfaction.

Table 1. Clustering information for Figure 2

Cluster	Keyword*	Occurrences**	Links	Avg. pub. year***	Avg. cit.****
1	employee	227	58	2012	45
1	subjective career success	145	58	2014	35
1	career satisfaction	102	54	2012	69
1	behavior	92	58	2013	42
1	promotion	79	54	2011	53
1	salary	73	54	2010	45

Cluster	Keyword*	Occurrences**	Links	Avg. pub. year***	Avg. cit.****
1	objective career success	69	51	2014	35
1	personality	65	51	2012	73
1	commitment	60	54	2013	37
1	leader	46	55	2014	18
1	high level	44	40	2011	35
1	employability	43	48	2016	67
1	mediator	37	45	2015	44
1	leadership	37	46	2015	15
1	supervisor	37	50	2011	82
1	career management	31	48	2012	30
1	employees	30	44	2016	14
1	personality trait	26	39	2012	91
1	organisation	25	43	2013	32
1	job performance	24	36	2012	52
1	career adaptability	23	38	2017	52
1	moderating role	20	35	2016	42
2	skill	109	58	2014	21
2	management	99	56	2011	27
2	student	97	52	2013	16
2	education	91	56	2011	22
2	gap	65	53	2011	21
2	university	62	53	2012	39
2	effort	61	50	2012	33
2	graduate	58	53	2013	29
2	program	53	46	2011	14
2	culture	51	49	2013	18
2	training	43	49	2013	21
2	human capital	40	46	2010	65
2	effectiveness	31	40	2011	44
2	business	31	44	2011	22
2	social capital	29	49	2014	72
3	woman	160	58	2009	34
3	experience	132	54	2012	28
3	gender	103	54	2011	35
3	interaction	72	50	2010	35
3	man	72	48	2008	48
3	life	67	53	2011	29
3	employment	47	49	2014	18
3	age	45	49	2009	30
3	income	41	44	2011	52
3	family	35	43	2009	48
3	work experience	25	47	2011	34
4	career outcome	65	56	2012	40
4	job satisfaction	59	52	2012	80
4	mentoring	55	56	2009	57
4	mentor	50	50	2008	53
4	benefit	42	50	2011	73
4	profession	30	44	2012	16
4	barrier	29	45	2011	33
4	organizational commitment	24	38	2012	60
4	organizational support	20	39	2014	23

* keyword found within the title and/or abstract field

** the keyword is counted only once for each document, regardless of how many times it appears within it
*** average publication year of the documents containing the keyword
**** average citations of the documents containing the keyword

Source: dataset analysis in VOSviewer.

Research topics covered by the 38 articles published in the 1968-1993 period

The 1968-1993 period (Figure 3) was characterized by research on career development and connected tools, the discussion of subjective career success, and extrinsic motivations, touching on mobility and career path topics. These articles received up to 200 citations. The results manifest three clusters:

- cluster 1 (red) contains articles mostly referring to mentoring, career development and outcomes, introducing racial differences and highlighting the middle management layer;
- cluster 2 (green) treats aspects closer to subjective career success (e.g. self-esteem, influence), as well as demographics (e.g. gender and age) and human capital (e.g. graduate degree);
- cluster 3 (blue) looks at management and mobility, introducing the career path and human resources planning, as well as the success criteria, pay, and income aspects.

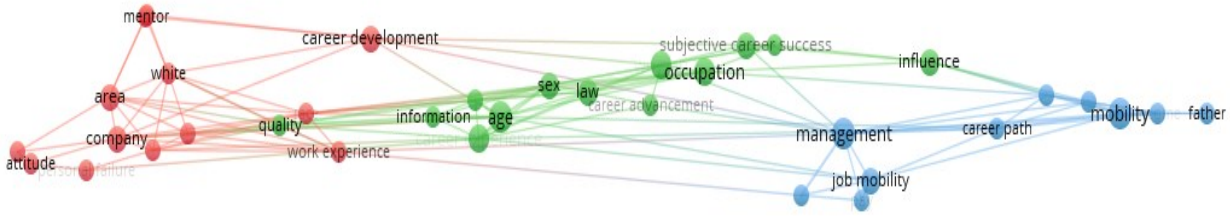


Figure 3. Main topics covered by the 38 articles published between 1968-1993, based on the title and abstract fields

Source: dataset analysis in VOSviewer.

Research topics covered by the 249 articles published in the 1994-2009 period

The 1994-2009 period (Figure 4) was characterized by a more sophisticated analysis of career success, which could have been due to the accelerated business development worldwide before the financial crisis of 2007-2008. Some of these articles received more than 1000 citations. The identified clusters of topics are as follows:

- cluster 1 (red) contains articles mainly related to subjective career success. It discusses job and career satisfaction, career goals, the role of mentoring and being a protégé, as well as human capital and intrinsic success;
- cluster 2 (green) treats aspects related to career development and change, including training, education, experience and skills, as well as culture and family, thus discussing the link between the private and professional life in a period of business development explosion;
- cluster 3 (blue) looks at the relationship between objective and subjective career success, mentioning income, pay, networking, personality, and behaviors;
- cluster 4 (yellow) concentrates on social capital and gender.

The seven most cited papers in the full dataset of 979 documents were published in this period and have more than 500 citations. Five of these papers are articles: (1) "A social capital theory of career success" by Seibert, Kraimer and Linden (2001) with 1319 citations; (2) "The big five personality traits, general mental ability, and career success across the life

span" by Judge et al. (1999), with 1141 citations; (3) "What do productive people do? A longitudinal model linking proactive personality and career success" by Seibert, Kraimer and Crant (2001), with 824 citations; (4) "An empirical investigation of the predictors of executive career success" by Judge et al. (1995), with 806 citations; (5) "A competence-based and multidimensional operationalization and measurement of employability" by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) having 517 citations. The other two are review papers: (1) "Career success in a boundaryless career world" by Arthur et al. (2005), with 631 citations, and (2) "Predictors of objective and subjective career success" by Ng et al. (2005), with 1240 citations.

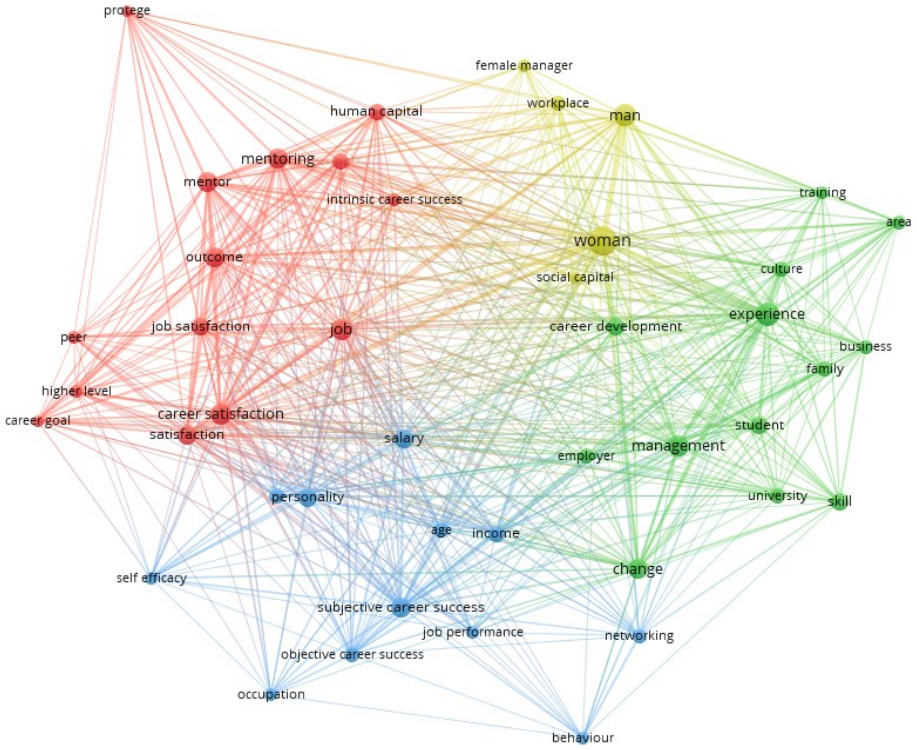


Figure 4. Main topics covered by the 249 articles published between 1994-2009, based on the title and abstract fields

Source: dataset analysis in VOSviewer.

Research topics covered by the 639 articles published in the 2010-2021 period

The 2010-2021 period (Figure 5) is characterized by topics of interest post financial crisis, grouped into the following clusters:

- cluster 1 (red) contains articles on objective and subjective career success, satisfaction, performance, and promotion, as well as employee behavior and personality;
- cluster 2 (green) is focused on human capital factors (e.g., training, experience, graduate education) considering the employability perspective;
- cluster 3 (blue) concentrates on gender and culture, as well as the role of mentoring.

The lower number of citations received by documents published in the 2010-2021 period compared to the previous time frame might be due to the exponential increase in scientific production on the topic during the full studied period (i.e., 1968-2021), newer articles on career success (as well as on other topics), citing the older, fewer ones. Moreover,

the decrease in citations after 2010 could be the result of the 2008 financial crisis, when research had other priorities.

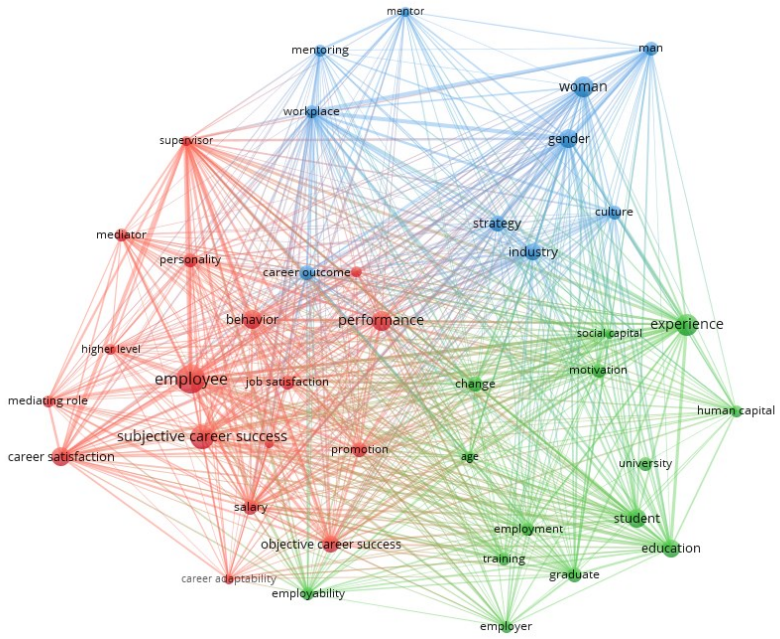


Figure 5. Main topics covered by the 639 articles published between 2010-2021, based on the title and abstract fields

Source: dataset analysis in VOSviewer.

Research topics covered by the 71 most cited articles (published 1968-2021)

An analysis of the topics covered by the top 71 most cited papers (having 100 to 1319 citations) in the full dataset of 926 articles was also performed, as available in Figure 6. These articles debate long-lasting topics, most of them being oriented toward the person. The following clusters were identified:

- cluster 1 (red) presents several elements of objective career success, such as earnings and pay, being connected to human capital and gender, as well as to change and career mobility;
- cluster 2 (green) is oriented toward personality traits, discussing the Five Factor Model in relationship with career success and adaptability;
- cluster 3 (blue) is studying the role of mentoring and guidance in job performance, career outcomes, and development.

The clusters come with practical implications. Firstly, career decisions are influenced by financial criteria, internal policies, and constraints. Secondly, the employees' adaptability is dependent on their personality traits. Finally, an increased importance is given to mentoring, an instrument used by many organizations due to employees' requests, and as a competitive advantage driver for employer branding and talent retention.

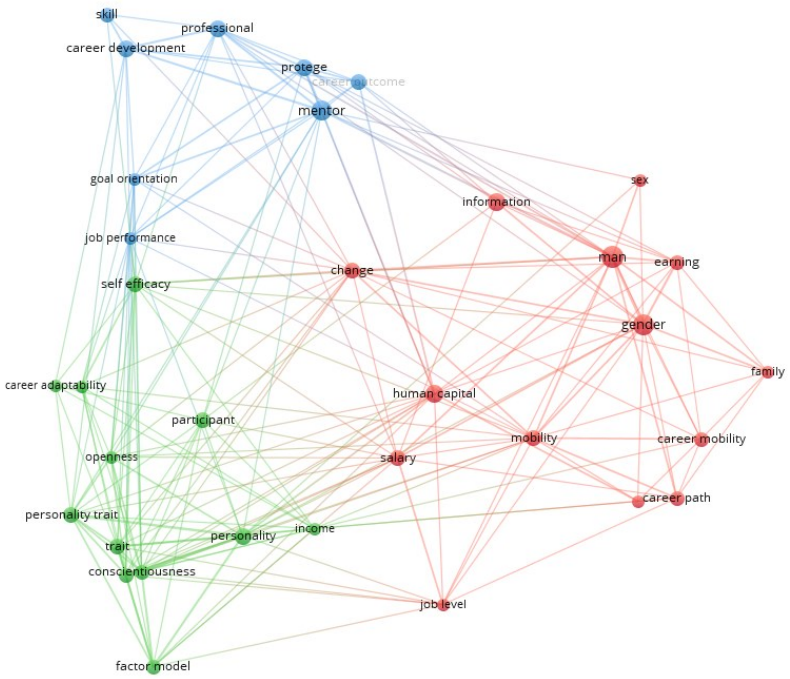


Figure 6. Main topics covered by the top 71 most cited articles in the full dataset (having 100 to 1319 citations), based on the title and abstract fields

Source: dataset analysis in VOSviewer.

Conclusion

Some topics of interest in career success remained constant over the years, such as mentoring, mobility, income, education, gender and culture. Alongside these, racial differences, self-esteem, and influence were mostly discussed in the first period (1968-1993), while the later periods (1994-2009 and 2010-2021) introduced the concepts of career satisfaction, change, the link between the private and professional life, the relationship between objective and subjective career success, networking, personality, putting a stronger accent on the personal characteristics of the employee, in view of the modern career types emerging since the Internet became available for commercial use.

The most cited articles throughout the period (1968-2021) discuss gender and human capital in relationship to earnings and career mobility, and study career success' relationship with the employee's personality traits, and the role of mentoring in job performance and career development. These papers are also oriented toward the employee, a trend that is expected to continue in the career success literature, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic propelled the self-driven career popularity, compared to the traditional, organizational-driven career.

Both scholars and practitioners could benefit from understanding the evolution of the interest in topics related to career success, finding inspiration for further studies, and for writing human resources strategies and policies.

The paper answers its research question and contributes to Pico-Saltos et al. (2021) and to other review papers in the field (e.g., Ng and Feldman, 2014; Spurk et al., 2019; Bagdadli and Gianecchini, 2019) by identifying the main topics of interest covered by the

literature on career success throughout time (i.e., 1968-2021), considering the number of article citations as a basis for splitting the dataset into time frames.

The paper can be viewed in light of some limitations. First, the topic of "career success" was studied only through Scopus indexed papers in English. Second, the paper did not address an in-depth analysis of the 926 articles' content.

Further studies could cover more databases or focus on a particular topic of interest in the career success literature. Moreover, parallels with company practices could be constructed, either on mixed industries or on particular domains, revealing more aspects of the applicability of academic research.

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