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## **Pursuing Career Success while Sustaining Personal and Family Well-Being: A Study of Reduced-Load Professionals over Time**

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*This study examines the experiences, over 6 years, of 73 managers and high level professionals who reduced their workloads to achieve more sustainable career and family outcomes. We compared personal, family, and career success outcomes for people who maintained reduced loads over time with those who went back to full time work, and we found few differences, except for more promotions for the full-timers. To further understand our results, we identified four groups with all four possible combinations of extreme success (either very high or very*

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*low) on our two measures of success, objective and subjective. The groups were labeled Aligned Achievers, Alienated Achievers, Happy Part Timers, and Hard Luck Strivers. Subsequent qualitative analysis of group members' reflections on the meaning of career success as well as the occurrence of significant life events helped explain the variation in their success in sustaining desired career and life arrangements over time.*

Not enough is known about how individuals adapt to changing demands in their careers and personal lives in order to create sustainable and psychologically successful lives over time. Careers are increasingly nonlinear and more customized (Benko & Weisberg, 2007; Cascio, 2007; Valcour, Bailyn, & Quijada, 2007), as individuals around the world, particularly professionals, seek to better balance rising workloads and career advancement with care-giving demands and other personal life interests (Briscoe, Hall, & Mayrhofer, 2012; Herman & Lewis, 2012; Kailasaphy & Metz, 2012; Tiedje, 2004). This growing variation in how individuals synthesize career and personal life priorities has occurred in part because the demography of professionals, particularly in major corporations, has shifted to include more women and employees in dual earner or single parent households (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). Many of these individuals are not only juggling care-giving for children with demanding careers but also elder care, comprising sandwiched generation households (Neal & Hammer, 2007).

Despite this shift in the demographic composition of the professional workforce, professionals are still typically expected to work long hours, sometimes as much as 60–70 hours a week, as a means to demonstrate their devotion to their jobs despite the fact that they have families competing for time and energy (Blair-Loy, 2003). Customizing jobs to reduce workloads and deviate from traditional norms about professional working time and workload is a growing trend in many industrialized nations (Briscoe et al., 2012; Valcour et al., 2007). This way of working is also often referred to as part-time work but is distinct from part-time in that it is not paid on an hourly basis, and it is pursued on a voluntary basis. However, it is worth noting that one-fifth of the U.S. workforce and 39% in the Netherlands work part-time (see Kossek & Michel, 2010, for a review of flexible schedules).

Specifically, then, in this article we will be addressing three key questions, which we will discuss later in more detail:

- (1) To what extent were individuals' career and life outcomes over 6 years related to their sustained pursuit of reduced-load work arrangements?
- (2) What is the relationship between levels of objective and subjective career success for these individuals?
- (3) How do different meanings of career success, along with work-related phenomena, personal and family events, relate to different patterns of high versus low objective and subjective career success?

*Interactions among Work, Personal, and Family Life*

Researchers have tried a number of different approaches to understanding how individuals are combining career with personal life. These include: work and family conflict as well as work/family enrichment (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Tiedje, 2004); boundary tactics and transition management (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Hall & Richter, 1989); kaleidoscope careers (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006); and customized careers (Benko & Weisberg, 2007; Valcour et al., 2007). However, few of these have focused on examining both career and family outcomes simultaneously, and few have empirically examined the reconciliation of career and family commitments over time. In addition, none of these studies has studied these outcomes longitudinally. The study reported here attempts to fill these gaps and shed light on the inter-relationships between personal, family, and career well-being as well as career success.

We define “career” using Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence’s (1989) definition, “the evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time” (p. 8). This definition has two major elements: work and time. The term “career success” refers to an evaluation or assessment of accumulated work experiences in the context of time (Seibert & Kraimer, 2001). There are two sides to success (Hughes, 1958). One is objective success, which is made up of the objective indicators of attainment that other people can observe, such as income and position. The other is subjective success, which is the individual’s own perception of the quality of his or her attainments. One need in the literature is to include both subjective and objective measures of career success in our research designs (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005). As Arthur et al. (2005) point out after reviewing 10 years of empirical research on career success and 68 studies, the preponderance of careers research has studied the objective career; but little research provides insight into both sides of the career or of how the individual defines career success. As the authors point out:

“... not one of the articles sampled involved listening directly to the research subjects, or even allowing them to nominate their own criteria for career success. While the purpose and design of any one paper may be worthy, the overall body of empirical work on career success seems to be sorely lacking in such qualitative input” (Arthur et al., 2005, p. 196).

Arthur et al. concluded with a call, to which we try to respond here, for more research on “how career success unfolds in a dynamic and uncertain world” (2005, p. 197). To promote this goal, they call for research designs that contain adequate measures of both objective and subjective success, as well as designs that can reveal “the two-way, time-dependent interaction between the two sides of career success” (2005, p. 194). They also call for a more holistic approach, involving a study of the developing person and different spheres of life.

*The Current Study*

In terms of this special issue, this article is crafted to contribute to the section labeled, “Work–home arrangements and individual career outcomes.” Based on the changes of the landscape in which careers develop, and the growing tension that builds as people experiment with balancing work and family, we want to explore how different kinds of arrangements for managing the work–home relationship are related to well-being and different facets of career success as a particularly important type of career outcome.

In Phase 1 of our longitudinal study, we looked at people who had negotiated a reduced-load work arrangement in order to pursue personal and family priorities while continuing a demanding professional career. Reduced-load work is defined as working less than full-time (e.g., 3 days or 4 days a week), with a commensurate reduction in pay. Some people did this through job sharing, and others did it by cutting back the number of days they worked each week. It is an example of a career strategy that can be used to help individuals reconcile work and family demands by reducing hours or workload, while sustaining commitment to their careers (Lee, MacDermid, Williams, Buck, & Leiba-O’Sullivan, 2002; Russell, O’Connell, & McGinnity, 2009; Valcour et al., 2007). Russell et al. (2009) compared the effects of different kinds of flexibility on work pressure and work–life conflict, and they found that only reduced-load or part-time arrangements (compared to telework, job share, and flex-time) had a positive effect on the dependent measures.

In Phase 2 of our study, we went back 6 years later to see to what extent these reduced-load work arrangements had been sustained and to determine how our participants viewed their career and overall life outcomes with the passage of time. Because of the longitudinal nature of this unique sample, we also examined the relationships between objective career success (e.g., promotions, pay, and status) and subjective career success (psychological well-being) as a way to look in depth at sustainability of well-being in personal, family, and professional life.

Another paper from the current project (Lee, Kossek, Hall, & Litrico, 2011) identified five distinct career narratives and presented a model of the evolution of careers. The model suggested that individuals construct careers over time through their own sensemaking of constantly shifting entangled strands of their personal, family, work, and community lives and three key dynamics that are ongoing: external events, gradual developments, and individual actions.

In the current article, we analyze whether objective and subjective career success are correlated. If we find no correlation between subjective and objective success measures, this would support the idea that there may be quite different determining factors for each. Even if there is a positive relationship, the fact

is that subjective and objective success are separate and distinct variables and experiences. Following the recommendation of Arthur et al. (2005), we wanted to examine objective and subjective success separately and in detail to explore which factors and events (organizational, personal, and familial) operating in a person's life relate differentially to objective and subjective career success. Specifically, we looked at different meanings of career success among case groups of individuals who reported different combinations of high versus low objective and subjective career success.

### **Method**

The two phases of this research consisted of two periods of data collection with 73 managers and professionals who were initially interviewed in the late 1990s and then again approximately 6 years later. We refer to these two interview points as Phase 1 and Phase 2. The purpose of the first set of interviews was to learn about the negotiation and implementation of reduced-load work, how it had affected individuals' careers and lives, and what factors facilitated or hindered the success of these arrangements. The purpose of the second set of interviews was to determine how these individuals had fared over time and to see how they had continued to make choices to achieve their personal, career and family priorities.

#### *Sample*

Professionals working voluntarily on a reduced-load basis were initially recruited using personal and professional contacts with individuals as well as human resource managers and work–life administrators in organizations. About half of the firms approached agreed to participate; those that declined stated that either they had no employees who fit the criteria, or they were not able to do the research necessary to determine if they had potential participants. Of the professionals approached, 85% agreed to participate.

The study was designed in order to maximize variation along several variables, including industry at the organizational level; and at the individual level, age, gender, type and level of position, and success of the arrangement. Maximizing variation along multiple dimensions increases the likelihood of capturing rich contrasts in qualitative observation to support theory building (Patton, 2002). Because the research team sought a heterogeneous sample, the representation of industries and jobs was monitored throughout the recruitment process. Recruitment of participants also targeted achieving a minimum of 10% men as this was their estimated representation at the time in the population of reduced-load professionals, according to informed observers in the work–life field. No more than

four cases were included from any one firm in order to increase the range of organizations in the sample.

During Phase 2, we made extensive efforts to locate the participants who had been interviewed in Phase 1. The response participation rate in Phase 2 was 93%, 81 of 87 original interviewees. We report data here on 73 of the 81, who also completed a timeline exercise that will be explained below. We compared the Phase 1 and Phase 2 samples and found no systematic differences on key variables such as gender, mean age, salary, industry distribution, etc. The average age of the participants at Phase 2 was 45. Eighty-nine percent were women, and 11% were men, which represented approximately the gender composition of professionals working part-time in the United States at that time. One participant was an Asian male, and all other participants were Caucasian. Ninety-three percent were married, and 47% were still working in a reduced load arrangement in Phase 2, averaging 29.9 hours per week. Thirty-eight percent were working full-time in Phase 2, averaging 47.4 hours per week, and 14% were not employed (of which about half were temporarily unemployed or retired and the other half taking a career break for family reasons). For the people on reduced load, the average load was 66% of full-time. The average full time equivalent salary for the sample was \$109,057 (U.S. dollars).

### *Data Collection*

Data were gathered in one-on-one confidential interviews in both Phases 1 and 2, mostly face-to-face during Phase 1, but more often by phone in the second interview. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and a half and were semi-structured in format.

In Phase 2 we asked participants to complete a timeline exercise to help us understand what had been happening in their careers and personal and family lives since the first interview. The timeline exercise involved a blank chart in which the vertical axis had a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 indicating “things working well,” and 1 “things NOT working well;” the horizontal axis represented approximately 6 years in between the first and second interviews 1997–2003. Participants were asked to draw three lines to represent how well things had been working in their career, family, and personal lives since the first interview. The instructions for filling in the timelines were as follows:

Draw a line from the time of your last interview with us to the present, indicating how well things have been working in (a) your career, (b) your family, and (c) your personal life. Mark each line with a “C,” an “F,” and a “P.” Then think about any critical incidents, milestones, or turning points that have occurred and indicate the timing (approximately) with an X. Please also initial next to each X to remind you when we talk about this in the interview.

The interviewers then used the timelines in the interview process to probe for details about the person's experiences over time.

### *Measures*

*Personal and family well-being.* The timelines were used to estimate participants' self-assessments of how things were working in their family and personal lives at the time of Phase 1 (which we call T1) and Phase 2 (which we call T3) and the mid-point in between (T2). These timeline coordinates served as measures of family and personal well-being at three different points in time, on a scale of 1 to 7.

*Subjective career success.* The timelines were also used to estimate participants' subjective career success. We created a summative measure based on the individual's perceived evaluation of "how well things were working" in their careers, as recorded at T1, T2, and T3 on the timeline. Thus, we defined subjective career success as the person's self-perceived assessment of how the career was going, averaged over the time span of the study  $[(T1 + T2 + T3)/3]$ .

*Objective career success.* We used two measures of objective career success. First, we computed the percentage increase in the person's full time equivalent salary (i.e., if a person were working 80% of full-time and earning \$80,000, the full-time equivalent salary would be equal to \$100,000) based on self-reported salary in Phase 1 and Phase 2, in U.S. dollars. As a second measure of objective career attainment, we used the numbers of promotions that the person reported receiving in between the two interviews (i.e., for those who changed employers or careers during the 6 years, we assessed whether these moves should be counted as promotions based on whether there was an increase in responsibility and/or status of the new position). This promotions measure, while positively related to salary attained ( $r = .38, p < .01$ ), gets at a different facet of success, which is the progress or change in position level and responsibility over the last 6 years.

It is important to note that the timeline exercise used to construct a measure of subjective career success was separate from the interview itself. Individuals were asked to complete the timeline in advance of the interview; then in the interview proper we collected salary and promotion self-report data. This separation in time and method decreases the likelihood that the collection of data for one measure of success would bias the data obtained for the other.

### *Data Analysis*

To address the first research question, we used one-way ANOVAs to compare the experiences of people who sustained a reduced load arrangement and those who

switched to full time, looking at the following outcomes: objective and subjective career success, family well-being at Phase 2, and personal well-being at Phase 2. For the testing of our second research question, about the relationship between objective and subjective career success, we computed the correlations among the measure of subjective career success and the two measures of objective career success (salary and number of promotions).

For the investigation of our third research question, an exploration of different individual conceptions of career success and other work-related phenomena and life events, we used both quantitative and qualitative methods. First, we created four groups of extreme cases, to maximize the differences among the groups. The four groups were: (1) those high on both objective success and subjective success; (2) those high on objective and low on subjective success; (3) those low on objective career success and high on subjective career success; and (4) those low on both objective and subjective success. The criteria for high objective success for the extreme case analysis were (a) being promoted once over the 6 years *and* (b) having a salary increase above the 60th percentile of the sample (31.85%) or being promoted two or more times over the 6 years. The criteria for low objective success were (a) experiencing no promotions *and* (b) a salary increase that fell below the median (26.04%) for the sample. For our criterion of subjective career success we took an average of each person's three ratings of how their career was going at T1, T2, and T3. Those with a mean greater than or equal to the sample mean of 4.67 were considered high on subjective career success; those with a mean below were considered low.

The numbers of cases in each quadrant of high and low objective and subjective success are shown, followed by the means and standard deviations in objective and subjective success measures used to create the groups (see Table 1). Second, a comparison of groups is provided using exploratory ANOVAs to examine differences on salient aspects of their experiences that had been recorded from the interviews: (a) demographic characteristics (e.g., age, age of youngest child, and spouse salary at Phase 2); (b) work characteristics (e.g., type of job (managerial vs. individual contributor), hours working per week at Phase 2, and employment status (full-time or reduced-load)); (c) number of significant job-related events occurring between Phases 1 and 2 (e.g., periods of self-employment, leaves of absence, changes from reduced load to full time, organizational exit); (d) number of cases with instances of personal or close family member serious health problems between Phases 1 and 2 (Health was included because the interviews revealed that this had important impact on people's experiences and choices in the years between Phase 1 and Phase 1). ANOVAs were used instead of MANOVA, because the dependent variables were not independent of one another, which is a required assumption that must be met with MANOVA. Some of the profile variables that we explored involved counts, or frequencies (e.g., type of job, employment status,



**Table 1.** Comparison of Extreme Case Success Groups

|   | Objective/subjective career success group |          |          |          | Statistics |          |      |          |     |
|---|---|----------|----------|----------|------------|----------|------|----------|-----|
|   | High/High                                 | High/Low | Low/High | Low/Low  | F          | $\chi^2$ | p    | $\eta^2$ | phi |
| <b>Success group characteristics</b>      |   |          |          |          |            |          |      |          |     |
| No. of cases                              | 13  | 9        | 7        | 6        |            |          | N/A  | N/A      |     |
| Avg. FTE salary in USD (T2)               | \$149,41                                  | \$117,34 | \$75,80  | \$59,11  | 5.35       |          | .004 | .34      |     |
| Avg. % increase in FTE salary T1-T2       | 65  | 52       | -11      | -13      | 10.82      |          | .000 | .51      |     |
| Avg. no. of promotion since T1            | 1.6                                       | 1.7      | 0        | 0        | 31.97      |          | .000 | .76      |     |
| Subjective career success ratings (T1~T2) | 16  | 11       | 15       | 8        | 16.29      |          | .000 | .62      |     |
| <b>Demographic characteristics</b>        |   |          |          |          |            |          |      |          |     |
| Avg. age (T1)                             | 38.8                                      | 41.1     | 41.1     | 38       | .82        |          | .494 | .07      |     |
| Avg. age of youngest child (T1)           | 5.4                                       | 5.4      | 5.1      | 4.1      | .11        |          | .953 | .01      |     |
| Avg. age (T2)                             | 44.5                                      | 46.7     | 47.1     | 44       | .74        |          | .537 | .07      |     |
| Avg. age of youngest child (T2)           | 9.1                                       | 9.5      | 7.4      | 8        | .40        |          | .757 | .05      |     |
| Avg. spouse salary (T2)                   | \$81,11                                   | \$180,66 | \$89,47  | \$152,38 | 2.19       |          | .122 | .26      |     |
| <b>Work characteristics</b>               |   |          |          |          |            |          |      |          |     |
| Avg. work hours/week (T2)                 | 47  | 45       | 26       | 27       | 7.64       | 14.42    | .001 | .44      | .64 |
| Type of job (T2)                          |   |          |          |          |            |          |      |          |     |
| <i>No. of professionals</i>               | 3   | 3        | 7        | 5        |            |          |      |          |     |
| <i>No. of managers</i>                    | 10  | 6        | 0        | 1        |            |          |      |          |     |
| Employment status (T2)                    |   |          |          |          |            | 7.73     | .052 |          | .47 |
| <i>No. of employed FT</i>                 | 8   | 6        | 1        | 1        |            |          |      |          |     |
| <i>No. of employed RL</i>                 | 5   | 3        | 6        | 5        |            |          |      |          |     |

Continued.

Table 1. Continued

|  | Objective/subjective career success group |          |          |         | Statistics |          |      |          |     |
|--|---|----------|----------|---------|------------|----------|------|----------|-----|
|  | High/High                                 | High/Low | Low/High | Low/Low | F          | $\chi^2$ | p    | $\eta^2$ | phi |
| Avg. no. of significant job-related events |   |          |          |         |            |          |      |          |     |
| Self-employment                            | 0.08                                      | 0.22     | 0.57     | 0.67    | 3.77       |          | .02  | .26      |     |
| Leave of absence                           | 0.23                                      | 0        | 0.71     | 0.67    | 4.12       |          | .014 | .28      |     |
| Shift from RL to FT                        | 0.69                                      | 0.67     | 0.14     | 0.17    | 2.79       |          | .057 | .21      |     |
| Organizational exit                        | 0.31                                      | 0.33     | 1.14     | 1.17    | 4.08       |          | .015 | .28      |     |
| Significant health-related events          |   |          |          |         |            |          |      |          |     |
| Major health problem for self              |   |          |          |         |            | 3.46     | .326 |          | .32 |
| <i>No. of cases experienced</i>            | 2   | 1        | 3        | 2       |            |          |      |          |     |
| <i>No. of cases not experienced</i>        | 11  | 8        | 4        | 3       |            |          |      |          |     |
| Major health problem for family            |   |          |          |         |            | 6.11     | .106 |          | .44 |
| <i>No. of cases experienced</i>            | 7   | 1        | 2        | 4       |            |          |      |          |     |
| <i>No. of cases not experienced</i>        | 4   | 6        | 5        | 2       |            |          |      |          |     |

major health problems for self and for family), and for these counts, we employed a Chi-square analysis to test for the significance of success group differences. Eta-squared values were used to measure effect size for the ANOVA results, and phi values were used for chi-square tests, instead of eta-squared, to report their effect sizes.

Once the groups were created, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the transcribed interview material to compare different conceptions of career success across the four extreme cases groups at Phase 1 and Phase 2. After the first set of interviews in Phase 1, the second author examined participants' responses to specific questions about what "career success" meant to them and what they wanted to accomplish in their careers.

Using a form of "axial coding" (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and through an iterative process of categorizing, collapsing, and re-categorizing predominant themes, eight distinct conceptions of career success were ultimately identified. They fell into three categories: (a) those related to organizational perceptions, judgments and actions ("organization-based"); (b) those involving individual respondents' perceptions and personal experiences, more or less independent of the objective work context (personal-based); and (c) those involving a mix of individual and organization-based perspectives on their personal outcomes rooted in objective organizational reality (organization and personal based). The organization-based themes included *upward mobility*, *peer respect*, and *organizational or supervisory recognition or appreciation*. The personal-based themes included *being able to have a life outside of work*, *being challenged or continuing to learn and grow professionally*, and *enjoying work*. The final category of themes was labeled organization and personal based, as these conceptions involved the individual's perceptions of personal outcomes but on organizational terms—specifically, *performing well* and *having an impact*.

These same themes were coded again at Phase 2, based on material from the second interviews. Two researchers read through each transcript using the eight different conceptions of success identified earlier and independently coded whether the individual referred to or used any of these meanings in descriptions of career outcomes and goals. There was no limit to the number of different conceptions that could be coded per respondent. After some initial training for consistency of coding, the two sets of coders reached 75% reliability in applying the criteria. Differences were discussed and resolved. See Table 2, which shows the profiles of career success meanings found among the extreme case groups at Phase 1 and Phase 2. In this analysis, which was exploratory, we were looking for distinct *patterns* in the meanings of career success over time for the different groups. As this was a qualitative analysis and exploratory in nature, we did not have specific hypotheses and did not do statistical tests comparing these groups on specific measures.

**Table 2.** Meaning of Career Success at Phase 1 and Phase 2 for Extreme Case Groups on Objective and Subjective Success

|  | Objective/subjective career success group |         |          |         |          |         |         |         |
|--|---|---------|----------|---------|----------|---------|---------|---------|
|  | High/High                                 |         | High/Low |         | Low/High |         | Low/Low |         |
|  | Phase 1                                   | Phase 2 | Phase 1  | Phase 2 | Phase 1  | Phase 2 | Phase 1 | Phase 2 |
| Organization-based themes                |   |         |          |         |          |         |         |         |
| Peer respect                             | 31%                                       | 38%     | 44%      | 11%     | 57%      | 57%     | 67%     | 17%     |
| Upward mobility                          | 31%                                       | 31%     | 33%      | 11%     | 29%      | 14%     | 50%     | 33%     |
| Appreciation/recognition                 | 8%  | 58%     | 22%      | 22%     | 29%      | 14%     | 0%      | 17%     |
| Personal themes                          |   |         |          |         |          |         |         |         |
| Having a life outside work               | 77%                                       | 100%    | 100%     | 89%     | 57%      | 43%     | 67%     | 83%     |
| Learning, growing, and being challenged  | 69%                                       | 46%     | 56%      | 67%     | 57%      | 71%     | 50%     | 67%     |
| Fun and enjoyment/doing interesting work | 0%  | 46%     | 44%      | 22%     | 0%       | 29%     | 0%      | 0%      |
| Personal and organizational inter-linked |   |         |          |         |          |         |         |         |
| Performing well                          | 77%                                       | 31%     | 56%      | 11%     | 57%      | 29%     | 67%     | 17%     |
| Having an impact/making a contribution   | 31%                                       | 58%     | 56%      | 56%     | 57%      | 86%     | 50%     | 50%     |

## Results

### *Effects of Sustained Reduced-Load Work versus Return to Full-Time*

To address our first research question, we used one-way ANOVAs to compare the experiences of the people who sustained their reduced load schedules with those who returned to full time work. Surprisingly, we found very few differences. There were no significant differences on subjective success, family well-being at Phase 2, and personal well-being at Phase 2. The only significant difference was that the group that had returned to full time work had received more promotions (1.27 for full time vs. 0.59 for part time,  $p = .002$ ).

### *Relationship between Subjective and Objective Career Success*

Addressing the second research question, we found that subjective career success and the two measures of objective career success were not correlated with one another. The correlation between subjective career success and the percentage salary increase between T1 and T3 was .09 (*n.s.*). The correlation between subjective career success and the number of promotions in this same time period was .007 (*n.s.*).

### *Findings from Analysis of Extreme Case Success Groups*

Given this lack of relationship between subjective and objective career success, we proceeded to examine four extreme case groups of *High Objective and High Subjective*, *High Objective and Low Subjective*, *Low Objective and High Subjective*, and *Low Objective and Low Subjective*, in order to gain insight into the apparent independence of these constructs, at least in this sample. We compared their accounts of what career success meant to them at both Phases 1 and 2. Before describing these findings, we report on the results of our quantitative analysis of systematic differences across the extreme case success groups on demographic and work characteristics, as well as job and health-related events over time.

Table 1 shows that examination of differences in demographic and work characteristics of the four groups indicated either no significant effect across groups (e.g., on age, age of youngest child) or predictable effects based on how the extreme groups were constituted (e.g., groups with higher objective success worked longer hours and were more likely to be working full-time vs. reduced-load). However, there were significant differences across groups on frequency of several job-related events (e.g., period of self-employment, leave of absence). Furthermore, differences in spouse salary and frequency of serious family health problems across groups approached significance. These findings

are addressed in relation to qualitative analysis of career success meanings across groups, which follows.

*High objective and high subjective career success.* This group included 13 women who were mostly managers with responsibility for a group of direct reports (10 of 13). Most were also working full-time (eight of 13), and the five working less were working between 80 and 90% of full-time. Five of the 13 were the sole or primary breadwinners in the family at the time of the second interview, and three had spouses who had spent a significant period of time, or were currently working on a reduced load basis, in order to help meet family commitments. Not surprisingly, the members of this group, on average, worked the most hours per week compared to the other groups (47).

The most frequently mentioned meaning of success theme in this group, at both Phases 1 and 2 was *having a life outside of work*. These participants' comments conveyed that they wanted to achieve, but within certain limits that allowed them to have a satisfying family life or personal life:

"It has meant getting to this level. . . while also being able to have a big family . . . which I have in my life now. And I don't want to be a member of the senior management team. If they offered it to me, would I do it? It would depend on the circumstances. If I had to travel all the time at this stage in my life, no." (Vice-President, Strategic Initiatives)

The other two predominant themes at Phase 1 were *learning and growing* and *performing well*. An example of the theme of learning and growth was:

"What means the most to me is having new challenges and growing professionally, not necessarily arriving at a particular position that I've been aiming for since college . . . No, it's more about what the job is than the title or level." (Asst. Comptroller and Vice President)

An example of the theme of performing well was,

"I think it is doing the technical work and meeting the challenges." (Accountant)

At Phase 2, aside from the most frequently mentioned theme of *having a life outside work*, two different themes had replaced those dominant in Phase 1, *recognition* and *having an impact*. *Recognition and appreciation* was considered an organizational-based career success theme, as it was dependent on behavior of superiors in the workplace. For example,

"I have to say that my ego has gotten stroked quite a bit at work from some of the things that I've been involved in, the successes I've gotten recognized for in the last two years." (Director of Clinical Trials Materials)

*Having an impact* was a meaning of career success that went beyond recognition and appreciation expressed by actions or words coming from a senior manager or leader. It meant being able to see for themselves the results or the effects of their initiatives or achievements.

“Success is feeling that I’ve made a difference, that I’ve done something really good, feeling that I’m giving something back” (Vice-President of Finance) and,

“Being able to be a mover and a shaker, to make things happen” (Asst. Comptroller and Vice President)

In addition, this group was the only one where a majority of the members (9 of 13) mentioned that career success has to do with upward mobility either at Phase 1, Phase 2 or both (i.e., the nine out of 13 represents nine different people over the two phases mentioning upward mobility. It is not a total of 9 mentions at a given point in time, so it does not show up in Table 2). However, at Phase 2 only four of the nine mentioned career advancement as critical to their definition of career success. These four clearly had specific goals about moving up in their organizations. Most of the rest in the group however explicitly said they did *not* want to go any higher than they already were, not wanting to make sacrifices in their family lives to succeed at a higher level.

“I don’t want to strive to be in a higher position in our organization. I have no desire to do that . . . I am content with what I do, and I think that goes into those three circles that I think I have . . . the kids and my husband and my work. And I think the danger is the work [at higher levels] becomes the bigger and bigger circle in your life.” (Accounting Partner)

This group knew what it wanted and was working hard to succeed, while being aware of and accepting the trade-offs. We called them the *Aligned Achievers*.

*High objective and low subjective career success.* This group of nine cases included individuals who at Phase 1 were all managers with a group of subordinates. At Phase 2 seven of the nine were working for the same organization as 6 years earlier, but on a full-time rather than reduced load basis, except for one who was officially 75% but having great difficulty maintaining the appropriate hours. The other two had left their previous employers and were self-employed by choice and were working approximately 80% of a full-time equivalent position.

The striking feature of this group was that most had a preference for working part time; yet only two of the nine (those who were self-employed) were able to sustain a satisfactory reduced-load arrangement in the face of their personal and family life situations and career advancement opportunities. Four felt pressed by their employers to switch to full-time work, due to the nature of the work load and/or the career opportunities available contingent on full-time status. All four expressed regret or concern about the effects of this change on family life and their relationships with their children. Two others were partially motivated to return to full-time by their spouse’s being laid off and the family needing the additional earning power. So the objective success of members of this group had been achieved at a cost, and they were clear about their preferences to be working less intensively. We labeled this group *Alienated Achievers*.

At Phase 1 there were four themes mentioned by more than half of this group's members: *having a life outside of work*; *learning and growing*; *performing well*; and *having an impact*. All nine mentioned the importance of *having a life outside of work*, and eight out of nine mentioned this theme at Phase 2. They wanted to be able to control the extent to which their work life infringed on family or personal time. *Learning and growing* was also a predominant theme at both points in time. *Performing well* and *having an impact* were both mentioned by more than half the group at Phase 1, but only *having an impact* was still predominant at Phase 2.

What distinguished this group was that they were the only group where more than half of all themes mentioned at both Phases 1 and 2 were in the personal-based category. It is ironic that these conceptions of success were very important to this group and are generally associated with subjective career success. Yet this group was low on subjective success. The very thing they cared most about—a part time schedule to give them more time for nonwork activities—most of them (7 of 9) did not have. Perhaps their objective success made it difficult for them to achieve what they really wanted, which could partially explain the lack of correlation between objective and subjective success. Alternatively, perhaps an acute health problem of a child at home could lead to more driven career behavior as an outlet removed from the difficulties at home. One such individual described her situation like this:

“ . . . my career has continued to move forward and upward even though my family life, you know, at times it felt like it was in a total shambles. And I can't explain that at all, except that work is a place where I don't have to deal with that . . . ” (Vice President Organization Development)

*Low objective and high subjective success.* This group of five women and two men were all professionals with specific expertise (e.g., engineer, research scientist), not managers. All members except one had continued to work on a reduced-load basis at the time of the second interview, by choice, and three of the seven were with the same employer; the one member of the group working full-time by choice had changed occupations and employer. The remaining three were self-employed, but only two of the three had chosen to leave their employers; the other one was laid off. Those who had chosen self-employment left their previous reduced-load positions because they had found it difficult and frustrating to try to perform their jobs to their satisfaction and maintain appropriate work hours.

This group also experienced important changes in their personal and family lives over the 6 years. Four of the seven experienced new family members (three births and one elderly parent moving in), and one experienced the sudden and unexpected death of her spouse. The other two described at least one serious personal illness they had to deal with. All seven talked about having made a choice about putting family or personal life first, above their careers, and being fairly comfortable with that tradeoff. However, it was clear that it had taken some time and struggle to get to that point. They were self-directed in their career and life



choices, and they had been proactive when they had to be (e.g., making voluntary exits when necessary, choosing self-employment, etc.).

The three main meanings of success for this group help to explain why they rated their subjective career success high, even though they had not experienced notable career advancement or “objective” career success: *peer respect*, *learning and growing*, and *having an impact*. We called this group the *Happy Part Timers*. Their positive attitude can be heard in some of their comments:

“What makes me feel most successful is that whenever I get put onto an assignment, all the other people around want to move onto it, because they want to work with me, because I try to coach and mentor and train as I go.” (IT Consultant)

“Doing things that make a difference and continuing to learn and grow while also working flexibly and according to my own rhythms.” (Former executive, now a Principal in a consulting firm)

*Low objective and low subjective success.* This group consisted of six individuals, half of whom were managers and half independent contributors at Phase 1 of the study. They were all performing well then, and half of them wanted to advance. However, this group was dealt some difficult blows by life. Over the 6 years, two lost their jobs after mergers, and two had their jobs eliminated due to organizational financial downturn and reorganization. Of the other two, one lost her job in a reorganization and elimination of her department. The other did not lose her job, but a reorganization had a strong negative impact on the work climate. At the time of the second interview, four of the six in this category were self-employed and working part time and were feeling insecure.

This group also experienced significant challenges from personal and family life events that were difficult and disruptive. Three of the six experienced a child with serious health or behavioral problems, which in two cases were life-threatening. And two of the six changed employers three times over the 6 years as they struggled to recover from being laid off and find other suitable employment. We called this group the *Hard Luck Strivers*.

The most frequently mentioned success themes for this group include one organization-based theme (*peer respect*), one personal-based theme (*having a life outside of work*), and one organization and personal based theme (*performing well*). At Phase 2 *performing well* was no longer important, perhaps because it had not really helped their careers. Two themes that became more dominant at Phase 2 were *having a life outside of work* and *learning and growing*. We can imagine that these changes had to do with trying to come to terms with their situation and their identity in the context of what had happened over the 6 years. Two of the six talked about specific sacrifices they had made in their careers in order to be able to deal with family responsibilities and illnesses or special needs. A third talked about the difficult transition to being laid-off and her feeling of loss of identity.

"Everyone once in a while I get a twinge about, 'Well, when I'm 50 and my boys are maybe home in the summer, you know, or they're already off doing their own thing, 'am I still going to be content with that?' sort of thing. Or am I going to kind of regret that, by that point, you know, I don't know if you can ramp it back up, kind of thing?" (Accountant)

"I felt like when I walked out [of the firm], to some extent, that I left a piece behind. Because that is part of who I was, really. My first aspiration was my career . . . and I kind of gave that up . . . so I think I would be lying if I said my desire wouldn't be to get that person back." (Actuary)

Another distinguishing characteristic of this group was that at Phase 1 organization-based themes were mentioned by half or more of the members, more specifically *upward mobility* and *peer respect*. But at Phase 2 organization-based themes were mentioned by a third or less of the members, and the only themes mentioned by more than half were in the personal-based category: *having a life outside of work* and *learning and growing*. These individuals wanted the trappings of success in an organizational context; but for reasons beyond their control, due to organizational turmoil or family illnesses, they were facing difficult circumstances and feeling little sense of career success at the same time that their objective situation in their career was not very desirable.

## Discussion

### *Relationship between Objective and Subjective Career Success*

It was interesting what we did *not* find in our data on success. We did not find any relationship between subjective career success and either dimension of objective career success. Thus, even though Nicholson and de Waal-Andrews (2005) argue that it takes a high level of objective success to provide the basis for a high level of subjective success, we did not find that to be the case here. Perhaps one might make the argument that money may be necessary to provide for health and basic security and safety, a la Maslow (1954), but it may not be sufficient to produce high levels of subjective success. Also, the participants in this study had all given serious thought to what they were looking for in their lives and careers, and they may have had more clarity than most people about the distinction between their personal or subjective definitions of success and the external trappings of career achievement (i.e., objective career success).

### *Observations on the Extreme Case Success Groups*

We did not find any direct relationship between the measures of well-being and either type of success, objective or subjective, nor, as we said before, did we find many links between these outcomes and work load arrangements. It appears that the links among well-being and success are more complex.

What did we learn about career success and well-being in the family and personal spheres through our examination of the extreme case success groups? One interesting group was those people who had done very well by objective indicators, such as pay and promotion, but who felt less successful subjectively. The people in this group were consistent in saying that having a life outside of work was very important to their sense of career success, with all members mentioning this at Phase 1. But they felt that they were involuntarily being pulled in the direction of pursuit of objective success.

Examination of the interviews of people in the Low Subjective/High Objective success group revealed some evidence for this phenomenon:

“Well, I bought into the [game]: if you want this great responsibility, if you want the title of general manager, then you have got to play the game. And I gave up my four day work week to say, ‘OK, I’m in.’ And I took my Think Pad to the cottage on the weekend because I wanted to play. And I got really into the rewards of what that means. I mean, I get invited to, you know, women’s leadership forums and all this stuff that I didn’t have access to before. . . . But, so where am I now? . . . I sold my soul to the devil is what I did. I really like being in the game but I just don’t want to kill myself over it. And I’m feeling a lot of pressure to the point that most of my life is cracking into little bits and pieces, and I’m not sure I want that job.” (General Manager, Learning Services)

One overall theme that emerges from all four of the extreme success groups is that many people manage to find their own ways, over time, to craft careers that work and that fit with what they value most in their family lives. That is certainly true of the two groups that are high on subjective career success. It may be that for those low on subjective career success, organizations could have been more supportive to employees trying to keep things going well on both fronts. Such an idea is consistent with Herman and Lewis’s (2012) findings on the importance of managerial support in enabling scientists and engineers working reduced-load to achieve success without career penalties. More generally, as Tiedje (2004) found in a longitudinal study, this personal life-crafting process is also facilitated by factors such as personal coping, learning from experience, and social support.

In some ways, our results provide a more nuanced view of the “career mystique” (Moen & Roehling, 2005), which argues that when people get caught up in their career involvements, putting in long hours, etc., they make family and personal sacrifices that lead to negative outcomes. Our findings suggest that some career-oriented individuals (e.g., High Objective and Subjective Career Success) are able to navigate high commitment to careers at the same time as high commitment to family and still achieve objective and subjective career success. However, these individuals were the primary breadwinners in their families; they had spouses highly involved in family work. Thus, our findings reinforce van Veldhoven and Beijer’s (2012) work that demonstrates the importance of understanding individuals’ private life context, and in particular the spouse’s employment situation.

We also saw that some career-oriented individuals are challenging the career mystique through sustained pursuit of reduced-load work, whether with

an employer or through self-employment, and that they can achieve high subjective career success even if their objective success lags behind. The people in our Happy Part Timer group show that it is possible to step back from the career “rat race” and still to experience a pattern of sustained career success over time. But the people in this group had defined success on their own terms and were often achieving it outside the boundaries of the organization. This entails challenging negative societal stereotypes about gender, parental status, and job-related competence (Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004). These individuals transcended the temptations of the career mystique and feel successful in their careers. An important question is, what enables some people to follow their own personal path, with a sense of personal agency, and what leads others to submit to the career mystique?

In general, the quantitative measures that distinguished the success groups included mostly work-related phenomena, with the exception of frequency of illness of family members. That is, those who were more successful objectively speaking tended to work longer hours, were in managerial jobs, experienced moving from a lower to higher work load at least once, and were less likely to have taken a leave of absence or exited an organization between Phase 1 and Phase 2. Those experiencing low objective success tended to have experienced more turbulence in their jobs—including a layoff and perhaps a period of self-employment. The low objective and low subjective group had significantly more family health crises over the 6 years. For the groups that were high on subjective success, their spouses (or partners) earned less than the spouses of the groups that felt less subjective success. And in fact, in the low subjective success groups, the partners’ salaries were quite high (\$180,658 and \$152,375), suggesting that these participants had partners in highly demanding jobs, which meant that their partners might be less involved in the family “work,” or that participants might have felt greater dissatisfaction with their own careers if they compared themselves with their partners.

In the many examples of people who bounced back from various kinds of setbacks (in the job, in the family, in personal life), there seems to be a general overall theme of resilience and thriving here. Most of the participants in Phase 1, including those in the low subjective/low objective success group, were able to come back from adversity and construct lives that provided a level of purpose and fulfillment. This is consistent with work by Voydanoff (2002), who finds the concept of adaptability and family resilience to be a strong factor related to positive personal and family outcomes. Family resilience is, “the successful coping of family members under adversity that enables them to flourish with warmth, support, and cohesion” (Black & Lobo, 2008). Black and Lobo (2008) conclude that prominent characteristics of resilient families include factors such as positive outlook, family member accord, flexibility, family communication, financial management, and support networks, among others.

## Conclusions and Future Research

As the experiences of the participants in our study have shown, reduced load work arrangements can facilitate the process of crafting lives and careers that work. Tiedje (2004) came to a similar conclusion in her longitudinal study:

“Alternative work arrangements (telecommuting, job sharing, flexible work hours) were very much in evidence in our sample, mirroring societal changes in the structure of work over the 13 years of data collection. Small, determined groups of women, men, and families who redefine work and family templates have changed things. Our study further revealed that, (a) there is no standard job template for women and new career/family templates are being slowly and incrementally created . . . and (b) more modest, incremental gains made by individuals can combat systemic forms of gender inequity in the workplace, for example, the example of leaving meetings early . . . Small, individual acts have the potential to inspire others who witness the possibilities and trigger large public consequences (see Myerson & Fletcher, 2000 for a discussion of this workplace phenomenon). How parents view parenting responsibilities is not only a result of company policies, but also the result of the workplace culture and practices (Lewis & Lewis, 1996).” (Tiedje, 2004, p. 798.)

Overall our study found that, while objective and subjective career success were not directly correlated with each other, they do relate to each other in more complex ways. We found major differences between the lives of individuals who have achieved high subjective success and those who experienced high objective success. People high on subjective success tend to be more self-directed and proactive in their choices. For example, people in the low objective and high subjective career success group made their own choices about remaining on reduced-load or about when and whether to leave their organizations, and many people in the high objective and high subjective career success group made their own decisions to limit their further upward mobility, for family reasons. These themes were similar to those found by Sturges (1999) in her study of the meanings of success in a group of UK managers, particularly among women (who represented 89% of our sample). People in our high subjective success group seem to have more of a boundaryless or protean career orientation, in that they are more self-directed and are driven more by their personal values. On the other hand, people who seem more motivated to strive for objective career success, whether by personal motivation or economic necessity, have careers that are more driven by their employing organizations. Since research has shown that the functioning of the traditional organization-based career contract seems stronger in some countries than others (Briscoe et al., 2012), comparative research in a variety of countries and cultures would provide more variance in organizational context and its influence on the nature of these career motivations.

Future research could build on the extreme case analysis method used here, with holistic longitudinal data on both objective and subjective success indicators. The fact that these were all people who had originally taken proactive measures to restructure their work arrangements, and had found ways to craft their lives in

ways that worked for them (even members of low success groups), would make this type of research ideal ground for a Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) approach (Cameron & Caza, 2004). A POS approach would lead us to examine the positive steps individuals and organizations can take to improve the sustainability of careers and families over time.

Research might also incorporate new measures of positive (and reduced negative) emotions linked to perceptions of work–family success. For example, Botsford and King’s (2012) measure of work–family guilt may be useful to capture emotions as mediators of success perceptions as individuals attempt new career strategies, such as requesting a reduced-load work arrangement.

More research is also needed to examine how perceptions of objective and subjective success are embedded in institutional contexts. As several papers in this special issue suggest, future research should investigate the extent to which perceptions of success are linked to societal and policy contexts of what successful integration of parenting with sustainable careers looks like (Herman & Lewis, 2012). For example, multilevel research might investigate how prevailing societal norms regarding sanctioned strategies for combining parenting with career shape the perceived viability of reduced-load work arrangements as an adaptive strategy for achieving career success. Most of our sample was U.S. based, and working part-time was viewed as deviating from the norm. In contrast, Vinkenburg, van Engen, Coffeng, and Dikkers (2012) found that in the Netherlands part-time work allowing for greater “shared care” while maintaining career *was the preferred societal norm*. In fact, Dutch mothers (but not men) employed full-time were viewed less positively than part-time mothers. Research should investigate how societal norms and policy supports regarding successful career and parenting models, relate to individuals’ success perceptions and personal strategies for achieving sustainable careers.

This multilevel approach may be particularly important when societies have individuals enacting new strategies that might violate prevailing gender and career norms. Research might study the extent to which mothers in the countries with social policies supportive of “shared care” (e.g., the Netherlands, Sweden, etc.) who work reduced load may have higher congruence between objective and subjective success than reduced-load mothers in contrasting policy contexts such as North America. To what extent does a supportive institutional and societal context for reduced-load career strategies make them a robust and vibrant vehicle for social change? [And even more fundamentally, how does a particular society value parental roles, especially motherhood, and to what extent are parents judged as equally agentic and career-committed compared to non-parents (Fuegen et al., 2004; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).]

In summary, this study shows that while using work–home arrangements in and of themselves did not necessarily predict subjective career success or personal and family well-being, such arrangements were a valued support. Reduced-load work arrangements enabled talented professionals to remain in the labor force and

sustain career involvement while maintaining the kind of engagement with family life they needed and/or desired. Our study results suggest that organizations and individuals should not look at these flexible work arrangements as a panacea in and of themselves or as necessarily ensuring psychological success. Rather the use of these arrangements should be studied in terms of their psychological meaning to individuals seeking cross-domain success across work, family and personal life, as they craft lives that work for them.

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