

Discovering the professional within: How identifying our character strengths can help build our ideal career and success

Gemma Williams

‘Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success. If you love what you are doing, you will be successful.’

Theologian, Albert Schweitzer

WE SEE IT EVERY DAY; we are surrounded by people taking jobs that they want and have worked hard for, yet once acquired do nothing but complain about. How often is it we meet someone who is completely satisfied, even exceedingly happy, with the job that they are doing? What are the ingredients that are required for us to be able to find the job that is right for us, and succeed at it? Success is a concept of which the meaning differs for everyone, as do the character strengths behind it.

In recent years, investigations into varying personalities in the workplace and how certain character strengths can influence aspects of work such as job performance, attendance and job satisfaction have soared (e.g. Judge, Martocchio & Thoresen, 1997; Barrick, Stewart & Piotrowski, 2002; Judge, Heller & Mount, 2002). People want good jobs, and they want to be happy, yet people are pursuing jobs that do not seem to fulfil their occupational needs, resulting in low job satisfaction and therefore low job performance, and so the cycle continues. In fact, recent reports claim that 60 per cent of people in the UK are not happy in their current jobs (Investors in People, 2015). This phenomena had not previously involved consideration of personality or character attributes; it was previously thought that people were unhappy in their jobs due to

influences from management, co-workers, home stressors etc. and it was even considered that poor job performance was in itself influencing low job satisfaction (e.g. Lawler & Porter, 1967).

The question that commonly arises is that if people are unhappy in their jobs, surely they would leave the job to go and embark upon a new career path that is right for them? Apparently not. Notwithstanding the difficulty of acquiring a new job in today's economy, people are surprisingly bad at self-assessing (Dunning, Heath & Suls, 2004), and so perceive the difficulties in the job they're currently in as being to do with management, co-workers, workload etc. which, of course, do have a significant influence. But, could a possibility be that their character strengths are not tailored to cope with the stress of this particular job? Should people be evaluating whether it's the type of job that they're in that is causing the lack of job satisfaction and performance outcomes?

Character strengths as a key to success

“Character Strengths and Virtues” is descriptive, not prescriptive. The emphasis is on classifying psychological ingredients of goodness in human beings across cultures, nations, and beliefs, rather than prescribing what humans “should” do to be good or improve themselves.’

VIA Institute on Character, cited in Peterson & Park, 2006, p1149

Character strengths are positively valued, narrow personality characteristics. According to Peterson and Seligman (2004) they are trait-like and can be ranked in respect of how central they are for each individual. These strengths can manifest in individual behaviours (e.g. working well autonomously), thoughts (e.g. viewing things positively) and feelings (e.g. being grateful) and can often be demonstrated in varying situations in everyday life. Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed the Values in Action classification table of character strengths and virtues, which contains six virtues and twenty-four character strengths; varying combinations of these strengths have been shown to have significant positive effects on working life, job performance and job satisfaction (Peterson, Stephens, Park, Lee & Seligman, 2010).

As an example, key character strengths such as creativity, open-mindedness and love of learning could mean that one of a person's primary virtues, or 'signature strengths', could be knowledge, benefiting them in working environments where artistic and creative abilities are required and regularly exercised. Similarly, character strengths such as fairness, leadership and loyalty could be a result of signature strength in justice, benefiting people in working environments where loyalty to customers or clients is needed (e.g. Peterson & Park, 2006). Could it be that these core virtues and character strengths, when identified and embraced, could lead to the most appropriate career choice for optimum job satisfaction? The premise behind identifying and building on your character strengths and virtues is not to improve or change yourself, but to identify your own strengths for your own knowledge (VIA Institute of Character, 2016). From this you could potentially identify what job or career path would be best suited for you through knowing what jobs your character strengths would be best exercised, possibly leading to higher levels of both job satisfaction and performance (Harzer & Ruch, 2013; 2014). Character strengths can also

enable better coping strategies under stressful situations in work and everyday life, not just specifically in the jobs that are most suited to you (e.g. Harzer & Ruch, 2015).

'When people become aware of their talents, through measurement and feedback, they have a strong position from which to view their potential.'
Clifton & Harter, 2003, p.2

Tailoring the 'self' to the job, or the job to the 'self'?

Can you tailor your personality to get the job you want? Yes, in theory. Should you? Maybe not. From the viewpoint of character strengths, it could be argued that while people can attempt to alter their strengths in order to fit with certain jobs and working environments, over time this could ultimately lead them to become tired and stressed with the constant effort exerted in behaving in ways that are not natural to them. For example, if one of a person's character strengths is persistence and they have to consistently 'let things go' or give up on certain things with particular colleagues or situations in their job, this could potentially lead to them feeling quite constrained and ultimately lower their job satisfaction. Opportunities for people to do what they do best at work each day, i.e. using their signature strengths at work, has been shown to directly relate to wellbeing, work engagement and overall business outcomes also (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002; Moradi et al, 2014). This is no different between paid workers or volunteer workers either, research has shown that irrespective of whether you've 'earned your way' in your job or not, if the work is in accordance with your character strengths then you will benefit in feelings of wellbeing and satisfaction just as much (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010).

Although, according to Tett and Burnett (2003), it's all about traits not strengths. Trait Activation Theory posits that we all have underlying personality traits that can be activated in differing circumstances, in response to varying types of rewards particularly in the

Figure 1: The VIA Classifications (from Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

| THE VIA CLASSIFICATION OF 24 CHARACTER STRENGTHS | | | | | |
|--|--|---|--|--|---|
| WISDOM | CREATIVITY | CURIOSITY | JUDGEMENT | LOVE OF LEARNING | PERSPECTIVE |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Originality • Adaptive • Ingenuity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest • Novelty-seeking • Exploration • Openness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking • Thinking things through • Open-mindedness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mastering new skills and topics • Systematically adding to knowledge | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wisdom • Providing wide counsel • Taking the big picture view |
| COURAGE | BRAVERY | PERSEVERANCE | HONESTY | ZEST |  |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valor • Not shrinking from fear • Speaking up for what's right | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistence • Industry • Finishing what one starts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authenticity • Integrity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vitality • Enthusiasm • Vigor • Energy • Feeling alive | |
| HUMANITY | LOVE | KINDNESS |  |  | SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both loving and being loved • Valuing close relationships with others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generosity • Nurturance • Care & compassion • Altruism • 'Niceness' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aware of the motives/feelings of self/others • Knowing what makes other people tick | | |
| JUSTICE | TEAMWORK |  |  | FAIRNESS | LEADERSHIP |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizenship • Social responsibility • Loyalty | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just • Not letting feelings bias decisions about others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organising group activities • Encouraging a group to get things done | | |
| TEMPERANCE |  | FORGIVENESS | HUMILITY | PRUDENCE | SELF-REGULATION |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mercy • Accepting others' shortcomings • Giving people a second chance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modesty • Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careful • Cautious • Not taking undue risks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-control • Disciplined • Managing impulses and emotions | |
| TRANSCENDENCE | APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY & EXCELLENCE | GRATITUDE | HOPE | HUMOR | SPIRITUALITY |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awe • Wonder • Evaluation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thankful for the good • Expressing thanks • Feeling blessed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimism • Future-mindedness • Future orientation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Playfulness • Bringing smiles to others • Lighthearted | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religiousness • Faith • Purpose • Meaning |

©2004–2016, VIA Institute on Character. All rights reserved. Used with permission. www.viacharacter.org

workplace. The Trait Activation model is a person-situation-interactionist model of job performance, which works around the idea of the 'Big 5' personality traits, commonly recognised as OCEAN (Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extrovert, Agreeableness and Neuroticism) (e.g. McCrae & Oliver, 1992), and argues that it is the interaction between the person and the situation that 'triggers' certain personality traits to surface. An interesting point of Trait Activation Theory is the concept of 'bidirectionality', which argues that one personality trait can positively predict job performance in one situation, whilst it can also negatively predict job performance in another situation. This concept could equally be applied to character strengths, an example being if one of your character strengths is humour but you have a job where seriousness and professionalism is required at all times, humour would most likely negatively predict job performance and outcomes. Yet humour would most likely positively predict job outcome and performance if you were to be employed as a teacher or an entertainer. Ideas such as these could potentially explain why some people are unhappy in their jobs; if people are applying for and obtaining jobs that are not in line with their character strengths, it could ultimately lead to lower job satisfaction, further negatively impacting feelings of personal and occupational success.

A professional in the making or more discovering to do?

An argument for tailoring your job to fit you could be to identify your character strengths based on the VIA Classification and formulate a plan as to how your strengths can benefit you at work, if you're already employed and do not think it's possible to upheave your career at this point. However, if it's a job search you're doing and you're wondering what job could be right for you, actually taking the time to consider what your personal character strengths are could be the key to building your ideal career and ultimately discovering yourself as a professional. The definition of

'success' differs for each person; building on what Theologian Albert Schweitzer said, it is happiness that is the key to success, and if you love what you're doing, in varying aspects of life, you will be successful in parallel with what your personal definition of success is. Identifying your character strengths could be the key to finding where your happiness comes from, and could therefore help build your future success through discovering the ideal profession for you.

Correspondence

Gemma Williams

University of Lincoln

14485915@students.lincoln.ac.uk

References

- Albert Schweitzer. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved 22 March 2016 from BrainyQuote.com: http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/albert_schweitzer.html
- Barrick, M.R., Stewart, G.L. & Piotrowski, M. (2002). Personality and job performance: Test of the mediating effects of motivation among sales representatives. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 87*, 43–51.
- Clifton, D. & Harter, J.K. (2003). Investing in strengths. In K. Cameron, J. Dutton & R. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organisational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline*. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler.
- Dunning, D., Heath, C. & Suls, J.M. (2004). Flawed self-assessment: Implications for health, education, and the workplace. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 5*(3), 69–106. doi:10.1111/j.1529-1006.2004.00018.x
- Harter, J.K., Schmidt, F.L. & Hayes, T.L. (2002). Business-unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and business outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 87*, 268–279.
- Harzer, C. & Ruch, W. (2013). The application of signature character strengths and positive experiences at work. *Journal Of Happiness Studies, 14*(3), 965–983. doi:10.1007/s10902-012-9364-0
- Harzer, C. & Ruch, W. (2014). The role of character strengths for task performance, job dedication, interpersonal facilitation, and organizational support. *Human Performance, 27*(3), 183–205. doi:10.1080/08959285.2014.913592
- Harzer, C. & Ruch, W. (2015). The relationships of character strengths with coping, work-related stress, and job satisfaction. *Frontiers In Psychology, 6*, 1–12. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00165

- Investors in People. (2015). *60 per cent of UK workers not happy in their jobs*. Retrieved 19 January 2015 from <https://www.investorsinpeople.com/press/60-cent-uk-workers-not-happy-their-jobs>
- Judge, T.A., Heller, D. & Mount, M.K. (2002). Five-factor model of personality and job satisfaction: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 87*, 530–541.
- Judge, T.A., Martocchio, J.J. & Thoresen, C.J. (1997). Five-factor model of personality and employee absence. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 82*, 745–755.
- Lawler, E.E. & Porter, L.W. (1967). The effect of performance on job satisfaction. *Industrial Relations, 7*(1), 20–28. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-232X.1967.tb01060.x
- Littman-Ovadia, H. & Steger, M. (2010). Character strengths and well-being among volunteers and employees: Toward an integrative model. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 5*(6), 419–430. doi: 10.1080/17439760.2010.516765
- McCrae, R.R. & Oliver, J.P. (1992). An introduction to the five-factor model and its applications. *Journal of Personality, 60*(2), 175–215. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6494.1992.tb00970.x
- Moradi, S., Nima, A.A., Ricciardi, M.R., Archer, T. & Garcia, D. (2014). Exercise, character strengths, well-being, and learning climate in the prediction of performance over a 6-month period at a call center. *Frontiers In Psychology, 5*, 1–11. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00497
- Peterson, C. & Park, N. (2006). Character strengths in organizations. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 27*(8), p1149.
- Peterson, C. & Seligman, M.E.P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York: Oxford University Press and Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. www.viacharacter.org.
- Peterson, C., Stephens, J.P., Park, N., Lee, F., and Seligman, M.E.P. (2010). Strengths of character and work, in *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology at Work*, eds P. A. Linley, S. Harrington, and N. Garcea (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), 221–231.
- Tett, R.P. & Burnett, D.D. (2003). A personality trait-based interactionist model of job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 88*(3), 500–517. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.88.3.500