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Corporate America and Politics: A Comparative Analysis of the Career Aspirations and Experiences of African Americans

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Abstract: This paper compares the career development experiences of African Americans in the areas of politics and corporate America. The authors identified congruencies in the career development experiences of African Americans in both career fields to fill the void in the literature concerning empirical research on the career development of African Americans in various disciplines. The researchers' findings inform their proposed culturally relevant career development model.

Introduction

Current trends indicate that by the year 2050, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, African-Americans, and non-Caucasian groups will represent 47 percent of the total American population (Catalyst, 2010). Consequently, almost half the workforce is projected to be made up of minority employees. Given the projected demographic changes, the management, organizational development, and human resource literature have stressed the need for organizations to value diversity through continuous career development in order to maximize organizational effectiveness. Experts in training and organizational development have urged organizations to learn about cultural differences and not surrender to ethnocentrism and to provide meaningful intervention and opportunities for minorities to continually develop their careers (Bierema, 2010). The challenge for these organizations is to create effective strategies and programs that will change internal structures, systems, and cultures to make them receptive to a culturally diverse workforce.

The focus of this comparative analysis is on the career development experiences of African Americans in corporate America and in the political arena in the 21st century. Despite the overwhelming evidence of the workforce becoming increasingly multicultural and the resulting increase in productivity and efficiency, relatively few organizations are taking the necessary steps to develop and nurture the careers of African Americans (Wilson & Roscigno, 2010).

African American Career Development

Because career development research has primarily focused on white males, career development experts now question the applicability of such research to the career aspirations of

African Americans. Traditional models of career development do not take into account the complexities confronting African Americans' career development (Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2008; Wilson & Roscigno, 2010). Only recently have researchers begun to examine the nature and scope of the career development experiences and choices of this group. These studies acknowledge that the educational and career development of African Americans have been affected by such factors as poverty, racism, juvenile delinquency, and a high percentage of single-parent families (Barrett, 2000; Palmer, 2001; Sokoloff, 1992; Wilson & Roscigno, 2010). Despite these odds, African Americans have made considerable gains in education and the workplace since the 1960s. However, various barriers persist (discrimination, prejudice, structural variables, lack of skills, etc.) which prevent African Americans from achieving their full potential in the workplace (Byars-Winston & Fouad, 2006; Cohn, 1997; Leong, 1995).

Notably, African American women are more disadvantaged than African American men in the career development process. According to Burke and Nelson (2002), while both are confronted with racism, African American women must deal with the added layer of sexism. Despite this, research shows that African American females tend to have higher educational achievements and thus greater occupational attainments and aspirations than African American males (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Burke & Nelson, 2002). African American women are also more likely to be employed in professional positions than African American men. However, the progress of African American women in the educational and occupational arenas does not translate into greater occupational status with better incomes. African American women continue to earn less than their male counterparts, and the situation is worse when compared to White men (Catalyst, 2011).

Research Design

This paper compares the findings of two separate empirical qualitative studies that explored the career development of African Americans in corporate America and in politics. Palmer's (2001) study explored factors that inhibit or facilitate the career development of African Americans in the field of training and organizational development. In Palmer's qualitative study of ten African Americans, six women and four men were interviewed. Their corporate positions ranged from first line managers to human resource directors, with their educational levels ranging from undergraduate to terminal degrees. The participants were employed by Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 companies located in the Southeastern United States. The research focused primarily on structural, attitudinal, and personal factors that affect career development.

In the second study, Rosser-Mims (2005) explored the leadership and career development experiences of nine African American women in their pursuit of a career in elective office in Georgia. These women, who ranged in age from 50 to 80, currently serve or have served in elective office at the local, state, and national levels. The underlying reasons for why African American women do not pursue a career in politics were explored.

In merging these studies the following research questions were addressed:

1. What were the important similarities that existed for African Americans that spanned two very different career paths?
2. What were the important differences that emerged for the participants?

The researchers uncovered congruencies in the career development of African Americans in both contexts.

Findings and Implications for Practice

Palmer's (2001) and Rosser-Mims' (2005) studies have reinforced the findings that African Americans are often thwarted in their efforts to optimize their career and leadership potential due to various obstacles. These obstacles are classified as (1) structural barriers (i.e., organizational policies, programs, rules, procedures, and practices), (2) attitudinal barriers (i.e., feelings, perceptions, and stereotypes held by certain members of the organization), and (3) race and gender barriers. In both studies, these barriers were identified as significant career impediments that have stymied the efforts of the research participants' opportunities to achieve optimum career success, despite being qualified experientially and educationally.

Proposed Culturally Relevant Career Development Model

While current career development research has identified cultural and racial factors as major influences in the career development and career aspirations of minorities, traditional career development models tend to ignore these factors. Based on the authors' research, Palmer and Rosser-Mims propose a more culturally relevant career development model. Hence, we adapted the University of St. Thomas' Career Development Model to incorporate culturally relevant factors as illustrated in Figure 1. Career and leadership development practitioners must consider such factors as gender, race, spirituality, religious background, sexual orientation and other cultural variables when designing career development programs.

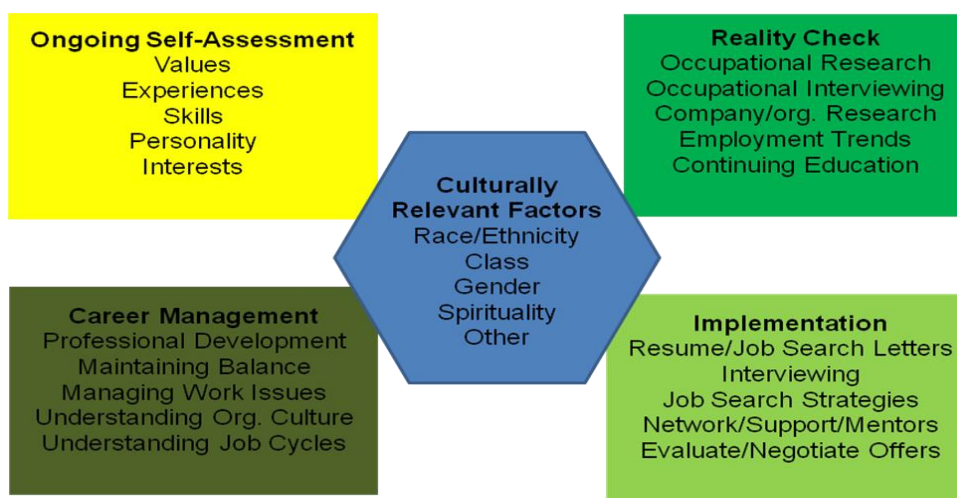


Figure 1. Culturally relevant career development model (Adapted from University of St. Thomas' Career Development Center).

Conclusion

In conclusion, as more African Americans aspire to positions in the corporate and political arenas with expectations of building careers in these fields, it is important for educators, career development trainers, and human resource managers to attend to the development needs of

this group. We also need to understand the ways in which the intersections of race, gender and other cultural differences impact learning along one's career development path. By comparing the findings of Palmer's (2001) and Rosser-Mims' (2005) studies, the authors reiterate that barriers persist. By developing culturally relevant career development models, barriers that thwart African Americans' efforts to realize their career potential in the corporate and political arenas may be more effectively managed.

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