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Transitioning Into Career Success: A Grounded Study On The Lifewide Learning Experiences Of Successful High Potential Individuals In Early Adulthood

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Introduction

Defining concepts such as purpose, giftedness, potentiality, and success can be quite complex and definitions may vary depending on the culture and context by which they are being applied. Though these concepts can be somewhat abstract, organizations are keen on finding the best possible talent, promising opportunities for growth and validating success. At a time where the need for productivity is commonplace in the arena of human resources, a movement for greater talent development is becoming more prominent (BCG, 2012). The centrality of the talent development movement is tapping into the core of human potentiality, with *high potential* programs eliciting attention in the Human Resources arena (Downs, 2015). In order to be considered a *high potential individual* the following traits of exceptional drive, ability, and desire to achieve at high levels must be present. The aforementioned traits can often be explored through ones' natural capabilities, engagement in effort to succeed, and high aspirations (Ready, Conger, and Hill, 2010). High potential programs were created to identify and retain talented individuals that have leadership potential. However, the focus of high potential research has primarily been on organizational programs, rather than looking at what causes high potential individuals to thrive and have a sense of purpose and fulfillment in their careers. Consequently, the talent development field is possibly missing out on the potential of gifted adults entering into the workforce, contributing to underachievement (Jacobsen, 1999). The term gifted is often attributed to children in gifted and talented programs in K-12 education; nevertheless, traits associated with giftedness in adults are closely aligned with traits high potential programs typically describe as identifiers of high potential individuals. For example, some of the traits that are found in gifted adults include: the capacity for rapid learning, high intensity when it comes to their aspirations, critical thinking and problem solving skills, high intuition and keen observation abilities, and having a strong desire to reach standards higher than the norm (Jacobsen, 1999). Organizations that have identified high potential individuals have found that they have trouble retaining talent or a lack of development may be associated with underachievement (Mattone & Xavier, 2013). Likewise, research trends in giftedness have

shown underachievement within the gifted community where nurturing environments are not provided (Montgomery, 2009). One of the main issues that has been found in gifted adults is difficulty finding where they best fit, whether it be within a circle of friends or the workplace (Jacobsen, 1999). Thus, a lack of understanding in talent management for how to best cater to gifted employees can also play a part in the lack of realization of potential (Mattone & Xavier, 2013). In order to grasp abstract concepts like giftedness and potentiality, taking a deeper look at the life experiences of high potential individuals was necessary.

Methodology and Purpose

This study aligned with an interpretivist epistemological standpoint and a constructivist approach to grounded theory. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lifewide experiences of high potential individuals that were able to reach success in early adulthood (23-39). Fourteen participants were enlisted in the study, seven of which were women and seven men. The make-up of the participants included racially/ethnically diverse individuals from different social-economic backgrounds, differing regions across the US, and various career fields. The commonalities of the participants included their high-potentiality, age range within early adulthood (23-39) and having both success and a sense of purpose in their career fields.

Among adolescents having a sense of identity, connecting with others and a sense of purpose are key developmental factors (Erikson, 1998; Erikson, 1980) and as an individual steps into early adulthood, navigating a career is often an expectation (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). The developmental period of early adulthood brings about thoughts of what is next in life and having the means to reach desired goals (Erikson, 1998) as well as serves as a time of defining and redefining life roles (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Furthermore, it can also be a time of emotional unrest (Baltes & Silverberg, 1994). In adult life course theory, Levinson (1976) identified early adulthood (ages 20-40) as a time where “exploration and provisional commitment to adult roles, memberships, responsibilities, and relationships” take root (p.22). The overall task of early adulthood according to Levinson’s (1976) life course theory is to:

Explore the available possibilities of the adult world, to arrive at an initial definition of oneself as an adult, and to fashion an initial life structure that provides a viable link between the valued self and the wider adult world (p.22).

A solid foundation in early adulthood sets the groundwork for continued growth. Researching the life experiences of high potential adults that have reached success in early adulthood helps to shed light on ways to create a more holistic coaching program for *high-potential* individuals.

Table 1. Participant Profile Overview

Name	Career Field	Age Range	Gender	Race	Education Background
Ben	Medicine	30-35	Male	Asian Pacific Islander	Post-Grad
Cindy	Medicine	30-35	Female	African American	Post-Grad
Daniel	Government	23-25	Male	Caucasian	Bachelors
David	Sustainability	30-35	Male	Caucasian	Post-Grad
Ian	Leadership Development	36-39	Male	Caucasian	Post-Grad
Jackie	Physical Therapy	30-35	Female	Hispanic	Associates
James	Marketing	30-35	Male	African American	Post-Grad
Jessenia	Beauty Industry	23-25	Female	Hispanic	Bachelors
Jessica	Midwifery	23-25	Female	Caucasian	Licensure
John	Non-Profit/Sports	30-35	Male	Caucasian	Post-Grad
Levi	Ministry	26-29	Male	Caucasian	Bachelors
Miranda	Higher Education	30-35	Female	Caucasian	Post-Grad
Patricia	Government	30-35	Female	Caucasian	Bachelors
Olivia	Real Estate	26-29	Female	African American	Some College

Rather than take a deductive approach to this study, I used grounded theory. “Grounded theory research does not normally proceed in the usual iterative manner of literature search, hypotheses development, followed by field research. As a rule grounded theory evolves from tentative literature base to begin with” (Goulding, 2002, p. 163). The goal of grounded theory is to construct an “integrated and comprehensive grounded theory that explains a process or scheme associated with a phenomenon” (Birks & Miller, 2011, p. 12). Whereas other approaches of qualitative research are more focused on describing and exploring a phenomenon, grounded theory is concerned with explaining a phenomena, with an emphasis on understanding processes (Birks & Miller, 2011; Charmaz, 2006). Process in this case is defined by Corbin and Strauss (2008) as “ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in response to situations or problems” (p.96). The purpose of this study was to understand the process of lifewide learning

and how it has helped to spur on a sense of purpose and high achievement in the careers of gifted individuals in early adulthood. Based on the information presented in the study, a theory was constructed that can be applied towards developing a holistic coaching program that recognizes the role of lifewide learning experiences and early adulthood.

Research Question

In grounded theory it is important to frame a broad research question in order to avoid constraining the study from taking shape according to the data. In alignment with grounded theory I used one broad overarching question, as well as some additional guiding questions to help look at different aspects of the broad question. The primary research question framing the study was:

What lifewide learning experiences thus far have helped high potential (gifted) adults reach success and a sense of meaning in their careers during early adulthood?

The following additional questions helped to look at different angles of the primary question:

1. What forms of learning (formal, informal or non-formal) have had an impact on helping high potential adults develop their talent?
2. What beliefs, motivations, and factors have spurred success in high potential adults?
3. What are high potential adults' ideas of success and what causes them to have a sense of purpose?

Results of the Study

Based on the findings, there were two distinctive categories that emerged from the data; one that focused on lifewide learning and the second solely focused on purpose. The findings of the study that covered the lifewide learning experiences of the participants revealed how their formal, informal, and non-formal experiences overlapped heavily.

The most prominent theme in lifewide learning was the role of informal education, which includes learning in a variety of spaces that is not necessarily organized or formal in nature like a school or organization (Melnic & Botez, 2014). Beyond perspectives of learning, the participants shared the breadth of their lifewide learning experiences and how they directly impacted who they are and ultimately their ability to transition well into their career fields. As I listened to the participants share their stories, conversations as learning, the social support of friends, and the motivational factors of their families, it made the role of support systems as a mode of learning undeniable. A support system can be defined as resource pool of people,

things, beliefs, or an environment that helps to support an individual by pushing them in the direction of their choice (Seashore, 1980). In this study participants identified the role of mentors, friends, family and upbringing, organizations and faith based communities, and even resources such as books as elements of their support systems. The pivotal role that mentors played in the lives of the participants was significant and the span of the types of mentors was as wide as the depth of the mentoring relationships cultivated. In some cases it was expert to novice mentorships, and at other times peer mentors. Regardless of the type of mentorship, the participants recognized mentors as destiny shapers in their lives. The role of the participants' family and cultural upbringing also served as major influencers, affecting their learning experiences and how they navigated life. In particular the participants family and cultural upbringing was linked to the participants motivations.

While Informal education was one of the most prominent themes of this study, the role of formal education worked in accordance with informal education. In the way that support systems served as motivators towards their purpose, in many cases formal education served as a life trainer and helped the participants see from different perspectives. Non-formal education served as a place of engaging and further exploring purpose. Key concepts that underpinned the participants' lifewide learning experiences included: *connected learning*, *relational learning*, and *identity capital*.

Table 2. Concepts underpinning Lifewide Learning Experiences

Concept	Definition
Connected Learning	“Connected learning is realized when the learner is able to pursue personal interest or passion with the support of friends, caring adults, and/or expert communities and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career success, or civic engagement.” (Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2014, p.10)
Relational Learning	“Learning through collaboration and relationships with others.” (Wang, 2012, p.25)
Identity Capital	“Identity capital is the currency we use to metaphorically purchase jobs and relationships... [it] is our collection of personal assets. It is the repertoire of individual resources that we assemble over time.” (Jay, 2013)

The findings of the study centered on purpose, explored the idea of an innate purpose, factors that helped to shape their purpose, and perspectives surrounding success. The results of the

study indicated that having a sense of purpose was of high importance for each of the participants as it related to feeling fulfilled in both their lives and career field. Furthermore, as the participants reflected on their own purpose, they were able to trace it back to early childhood. Although the participants may not have known what they wanted to be, there was a recognition of a sense of innate purpose that was already present, but grew over time. This trend of an innate purpose emerged as I listened to participants reflect on things they enjoyed when they were younger and then compared it to their current roles and what they identify as their purpose. It became evident that it was not so much that the participants were choosing a new purpose as they got older, but a picture of their purpose was evolving. Beyond innate purpose the most prominent finding related to the participants having a sense of fulfillment was the importance of making an impact. With over 150 statements about making an impact, it was a prominent language of the participants (i.e. “I just want to make a difference”, “we’re making history”, “I want to instill passion and change”, “make an impact”, etc.). The fuel that helped to shape their purpose was their people centric focus as well as the notion of believing in something greater than oneself. The following chart highlights the most prominent findings on how participants identified spirituality (believing in something greater than self) as helping to fuel their purpose:

Table 3. Findings Related to Spirituality

Spirituality as a Purpose Shaping Factor	Function
Faith	Serving as a guide in their life and decision making process.
Interconnectedness	A universal view of being interconnected as a human race.
Seeing Virtue in Others	A philosophy that is focused on seeing virtue in everyone.

Innate purpose and spirituality helped to show the development and fuel behind the purpose of the participants; however to understand what causes the participants to have a sense of fulfillment, I spent time listening for statements that the participants made that directly correlated to their sense of fulfillment. The following table highlights the findings regarding what participants saw as providing a sense of success in their endeavors:

Table 4. Findings Related to Sense of Fulfillment

Core Perspectives Causing a Sense of Fulfillment	Function
Contentment	Served the desire to be happy and satisfied with the work that they were doing.
Positively impacting others	Aligned with their core of being people centric and desire to impact others
Achieving goals	Aligned with traits associated with high potentiality of high ability, commitment, and desire to achieve at high levels.

It was through the breadth of lifewide learning experiences of the participants that they experienced connected learning, relational learning, and experiences that provided them identity capital to step into their desired career roles. In essence. The participants matched their breadth of learning, with intentionality by practically applying their experiences to work they deemed purposeful, leading to career consolidation (the merging of ones identity into the work that they do).

Conclusions

Through grounded theory, based on the results of the study I was able to create a purpose development theory. As I listened to the participants' stories there was a clear evolving process of purpose development. First the participants talked about the early signs of their purpose coming to the surface, learning experiences that helped them to develop their purpose, and opportunities that presented themselves that allowed for them to put the essence of who they are to work. I would like to emphasize that each phase has a continuous flow into each other, rather than a linear building block. As the participants reflected on their lifewide learning experiences in the context of purpose the following phases emerged:

- Discovering purpose, often underpinned by *purpose cultivators*.
- Developing purpose, often underpinned by *destiny shifters*.
- Demonstrating purpose, often underpinned by *success factors & perspectives*.

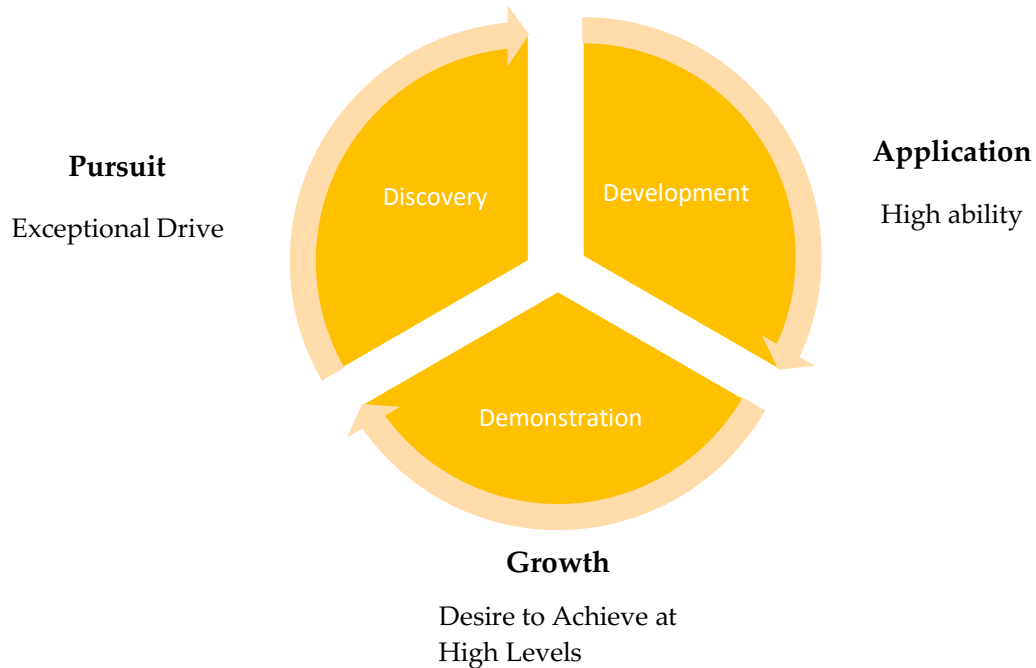


Figure 1. This figure helps to show a picture of how the cyclical process of purpose also coincides with traits associated with high-potentiality.

The core of a high potential individual consists of high aspirations and exceptional drive, high ability, and a desire to achieve at the highest levels. Having an exceptional drive and high aspirations causes high potential individuals to pursue a greater understanding of their purpose. The drive for a greater understanding of purpose fuels the discovery to the development phase, and capabilities associated with high ability are applied during the development phase, which flows into the demonstration phase. Lastly, during the demonstration phase growth is manifested through achievement meeting the desire to achieve and reach goals. Ultimately the participants leveraged their lifewide learning experiences to step into career opportunities that aligned with their purpose. The results of this study have implications that can be adopted by adult education professionals, higher education, talent managers, and practitioners working within the field of coaching who want to understand the nature of high potential individuals, the role of lifewide learning experiences in their growth, and the environments where they flourish and are able to have the greatest impact.

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