A positive approach to career coaching

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Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi took the psychology research community by storm in 2000 with their paper on positive psychology, introducing it as an academically rigorous antidote to the pathology-driven paradigm that had dominated the discipline for nearly a century. The growing body of evidence around both theory and practice is making the links between positive psychology, career development and career coaching, increasingly clear. This paper will describe the contribution that positive psychology research makes to our understanding of the career context, and will explore how positive psychology can inform and enhance both the process and content of career coaching interventions.

Introduction

The dominant paradigm within psychology during the late twentieth century was a pathology-focused medical model; one that looked at repairing damage and curing mental illness. Positive psychology in contrast was to focus on the things that make life worth living, and examine 'positive subjective experience, positive individual traits and positive institutions' (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000:5). Conceptually, positive psychology was not altogether new, with much of its core thinking reflecting the ideas of earlier psychologists and philosophers such as self-actualization (Maslow, 1971) and optimal functioning (Rogers, 1961), both proposed within the framework of humanistic psychology. One particular contribution that positive psychology has made to the discipline is its rigorous application of scientific methods, providing academically credible empirical evidence to support its ideas, enhancing the debate by employing 'randomized,

controlled experiments to study the good life, the engaged life and the meaningful life' (Jacobsen, 2006:26)

Much of the research within positive psychology focuses on a career context. The literature provides empirical evidence of the links between career satisfaction and well-being in life, and between meaning in life and meaning in work (Rath and Harter, 2010). It also deepens our understanding of what a fulfilled work-life looks like and how to achieve it. In addition to its theoretical contribution, positive psychology provides practical mechanisms for 'weaving the "straw" of research into the "gold" of artful coaching' (Kauffman, Bonniwell and Silberman, 2010:159), introducing techniques that can support clients as they identify and search for fulfilling careers.

Coaching has been described as a 'natural home' for positive psychology (Grant and Cavanagh, 2007) and the synergies are not hard to find. Positive psychology and coaching both strive to inspire growth and change by focusing on the positive aspects of human nature, and both aim to support optimal functioning in individuals, groups and society. This shared philosophy has led to the description of coaching as 'an ideal vehicle through which the science of positive psychology can be applied' (Kauffman et al, 2010:159).

This paper explores the processes and tools of positive psychology career coaching, and the contribution that positive psychology research makes to our understanding of a fulfilled work life. It looks at how positive psychology can inform and enhance both the process and content of career coaching interventions, discussing specific techniques which can support clients in raising their self awareness and boosting positive emotions.

What does positive psychology tell us about leading a fulfilled life?

Positive psychology literature begins to crystallize our understanding of the nature of a 'fulfilled life', identifying three different types of happiness: pleasure, engagement and meaning (Peterson, Park and Seligman, 2005). The pursuit of pleasure concerns meeting homeostatic needs such as eating and drinking. An engaged life involves taking an active interest in one's life tasks; leisure activities that one is passionate about, a family one devotes oneself to, or a high level of work engagement. Achieving the meaningful life entails being significantly involved in something that an individual considers to be bigger than themselves; this gives their life a purpose. This could be family, voluntary work, the community, or the organisation they work for, or could be a spiritual or religious connection. Seligman (2002) suggests that all three approaches can contribute to a fulfilled life, and need to be nurtured and balanced, but holds that it is the meaningful life that most contributes to long-term life satisfaction. Meaning in life is something we have long known to be important (e.g. Frankl 1965; Duckworth et al. 2005) and more recent evidence can be found to demonstrate that meaning in life is positively related to well-being, self-actualisation, fulfilment and job satisfaction (King, Hicks, Krull and Del Gaiso, 2006; Rubinstein 2006).

In pursuit of a clear idea of the factors that contribute to a fulfilled life, Rath and Harter (2010) analysed data from a large scale, international, longitudinal survey, and identified five essential areas of well-being: career, social, financial, physical and community. Those with healthy social well-being surround themselves with supportive people and develop and nurture their relationships. Financial security ensures that basic needs are met, and gives individuals some control over what they do and when they do it. Those with thriving physical well-being eat and sleep well and exercise regularly, leading to more energy and better health. Community well-being comes from feeling safe and secure in your environment and having a sense of pride in your locality. Rath and Harter provide compelling evidence that a fulfilled life will involve

doing well in all five of these areas, and that they are all interdependent on each other.

How does Career fit in with a fulfilled life?

The fifth essential area of well-being is career, and Rath and Harter argue that 'career wellbeing is arguably the most essential of the five elements' (2010;16), supporting their claim with data that suggest that 'people with high career wellbeing are more than twice as likely to be thriving in their lives overall' (Rath and Harter, 2010: 16). The authors' explanation for the importance of career well-being is simply that we spend a considerable proportion of our lives at work, so work satisfaction will inevitably have a significant impact on our lives more broadly. They also point to research which highlights the devastating impact that redundancy or prolonged unemployment can have. Studies into the effects of unemployment (such as Guindon and Smith 2002; Clarke, Georgellis and Sanfey, 2002) link long-term unemployment with higher levels of stress, depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem and a loss of identity.

What are 'strengths' in a positive psychology context?

One of the most widely studied concepts emerging from positive psychology is that of strengths, and for career coaches, this has great relevance.

There are many different conceptualisations and categorisations of skills, traits, or qualities but the framework of strengths developed through positive psychology is one categorisation whose existence and role in career choice and development has been rigorously tested. Seligman and Peterson identified 24 strengths which stem from six virtues that their research suggests are consistently held in high regard across the world (Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson, 2005). These virtues are: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence. Three or four distinct strengths have been associated with each of these virtues, for example the strengths associated

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with humanity are kindness, love and social intelligence; those associated with justice are fairness, leadership and teamwork. The strengths are identified based on 13 criteria, such as the strength's moral value, whether it diminishes others, and if one can identify specific paragons who strikingly embody it.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) compare their conceptualisation of character strengths to the psychological concept of personality traits, finding areas of overlap and clear distinctions. Strengths and traits are similar in that both groups of qualities are relatively stable, and both describe individual differences that manifest themselves through thoughts, feelings and behaviours. The key difference is that strengths include a dimension of moral and cultural value judgments which is absent in most descriptions of personality traits.

Let's now delve deeper into the research that enhances our understanding of careers and could contribute to our career interventions.

What can positive psychology contribute to our understanding of fulfilling careers?

Positive psychology provides empirical evidence about a range of career-relevant factors such as work engagement, meaning and the use of strengths at work. It has produced evidence that these factors are linked to job satisfaction, which in turn links to meaning in life. At this stage of the young discipline's existence, the literature points to relationships between factors rather than definitive causal relationships, but is nonetheless valuable to us as practitioners.

Strengths seem to play a key role. Using our strengths within the work place has been shown to have an impact on overall well-being and job satisfaction. In particular, several studies (e.g. Park and Peterson 2007; Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews 2012) have shown that using strengths, and specifically, using 'signature', or most significant strengths increases well-being and job satisfaction, and reduces the symptoms of depression. Other studies demonstrate clear links

between positive work experiences, such as increased work engagement and the use of up to four strengths at work, and greater job satisfaction (Littman-Ovadia & Davidovitch, 2010).

Engagement is one of the concepts shown to be linked to job satisfaction, but on top of this, the literature suggests that engagement is a good thing in itself. People with high work engagement have lower stress levels and higher levels of happiness during the working day, and disengagement at work 'appears to be a leading indicator of a subsequent clinical diagnosis of depression' (Littman-Ovadia and Davidovitch, 2010:24).

Work engagement clearly has benefits in terms of job satisfaction and its contribution to life well-being through reducing the chances of mental ill-health, and we are beginning to understand something of the factors that contribute to it. The studies above suggest that the use of strengths is likely to lead to engagement. The Rath and Harter (2010) data provide some indications of other antecedents of work engagement, and identify a good line-manager as an important factor. Their study indicates that a manager who pays you significant positive attention, and who focuses on your strengths, can significantly reduce your chances of becoming actively disengaged at work (Rath, 2007). Finding a job that stretches your abilities, but allows you to succeed can enhance flow which is linked to engagement (Jacobsen 2010).

Relationships with other colleagues have also been shown to have an impact on job satisfaction. Rath and Harter (2010) found that having a 'best friend' at work is linked with higher levels of job fulfilment, which builds on evidence from Roelen, Koopmans and Groothoff(2008) indicating that a team of supportive colleagues improves your feelings about your work.

There are clear correlations between hope, optimism and resilience, and job satisfaction (Harter and Gurley 2008), indicating that it's not always just the job, or the degree of person-environment fit that influences job satisfaction, but that factors residing within the individual play their part.

As well as suggesting factors which may lead to job satisfaction, positive psychology has helped to identify some factors that won't. Jacobsen (2010) shows that

following a high salary does not lead to job fulfilment. Aknin (2009) reports that in general people tend to over-estimate the impact that salary has on happiness, so in career decision-making terms, are likely to pursue a well-paid job over a more modest one, based on the expectation that it will bring higher life happiness.

The amount of fun you have during your working day has been linked to lower levels of satisfaction at work. Money, Hillendrasand and Da Camara (2008) adapted Seligman's Approaches to Happiness questionnaire to a work context and in one large scale study found a significant negative correlation between pleasure at work and job satisfaction. Their explanation for this surprising finding was that 'what matters in the 21st century is meaning' (2008: 30), suggesting that those who prioritise seeking pleasure from work over other factors may end up dissatisfied.

It's a complicated picture. We don't quite understand the nature or the causal direction of the relationships between many of these factors, but we do know that the links are there. We can serve our clients well if we encourage them to identify their strengths and the environments where they can use them, and to examine their working relationships and the level of challenge they experience; sharing evidence with clients about the factors that tend to be associated with job satisfaction can help to ensure that their career decision making processes lead to the outcomes they are hoping for.

How can positive psychology inform the process of career coaching?

Positive psychology has developed some specific models and tools that can enable us to work more effectively with clients. In particular, there are tools which we can use to help our clients with their self-awareness and with boosting their general well-being.

Increasing self awareness

Above, we examined some empirical support for the idea that if you can find a role which allows you to use your strengths, you are more likely to be fulfilled at work.

Seligman's website (www.authentichappiness.com) has three different strengths finders that clients could use before, during, or in between career coaching sessions to help them identify their strengths. The full version, the Values in Action (VIA) Strengths Finder consists of 240 questions and provides a reliable and valid online tool that allows users to identify their strengths profile and signature strengths. The Brief Strengths Finder has just 24 questions, while the VIA Strengths for Children is specifically developed for work with the younger age group.

The research behind the strengths finder is an example of the academic rigour positive psychology brings. The strengths finder has been taken by over one million people and all the results are fed into the data set, thus enhancing our understanding of the exact nature of these constructs and the roles that they play within the workplace.

The Strengths Development Model (Clifton and Harter 2003) is a three-stage framework that career practitioners can use in one-to-one interventions to help clients identify and understand their strengths. The first stage is identification of strengths, which Clifton and Buckingham (2001) suggests can be done by using five triggers: yearning, rapid learning, flow, glimpses of excellence and satisfaction. Practitioners can use these triggers as starting points for discussions, encouraging clients to explore times in their lives when they have experienced flow, or surprised themselves by learning a new skill quickly and instinctively without much conscious effort. Clients can explore the strengths and talents that might be common to these experiences. The second stage of the model encourages clients to integrate these strengths into their self view. The client is asked to think about their activities and to identify the role that their strengths have played in their successes; they then apply this thinking to their future goals and identify how their strengths can help them to achieve them. The third stage of the strengths development model is behavioural change, when the client puts their plans, which now incorporate their strengths, into action.

One of Seligman's questionnaires, the Approaches to Life Questionnaire, has been adapted for career work by Money, Hillenbrand and de Camara (2009). It allows participants to identify the relative strengths of the pleasure, enjoyment and meaning that they get from work. Given the research quoted above that it is meaning above enjoyment, and enjoyment above pleasure, that leads to job satisfaction, this questionnaire could help clients better understand their current situation and identify what might need to change in order to increase their work fulfilment.

Cultivating Positive Emotions

Positive psychology has identified techniques that enhance general well-being in life and these can be usefully incorporated within career coaching practice. It provides some evidence (Frederickson 2009) that positive emotions make us more resilient, more creative and more likely to seek out relationships. These qualities have all a part to play in career decision-making and job-seeking. Career theories of planned happenstance (Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz, 1999) speak of the importance of seeking out and taking advantage of opportunities and positive emotions have been shown to make individuals more likely to identify and seize chances. There is evidence that relationships of various sorts enhance job search strategies, with networking (Wanberg 2000; Van Hoye 2009) and social support (Kanfer, Wanberg and Kantrowitz, 2001) both making a significant contribution to a successful job hunt.

Piecing the evidence together, we can reasonably conclude that boosting our clients' general well-being could bring some palpable benefits to their job hunts. Positive psychology has two straightforward techniques that we can share with our clients that have been shown to have a significant impact on overall well-being (Seligman et al., 2005).

The first is 'three good things in life'. Every night for a week, your clients should write down three things that went well during that day. Clients need to specify why the thing went well and what their particular involvement was. It does not need to be a life-changing or dramatic incident; it might be as simple as that they got a seat on the train to work that morning, and

their role was that they took the time to relax during their journey. There is some evidence that doing this exercise daily for as little as a week can result in a sustained increase in well-being that lasts for up to six months (Seligman, 2005), and has a positive impact on self-efficacy (Critchley and Gibbs, 2012).

In the second exercise, clients are asked first to identify their 'signature strength', and are then encouraged to use it in a new and different way every day for a week. If, for example, your signature strength is your love of learning, you might decide to research something new on the internet one day, watch a factual television programme the next, and visit a museum on the third. As with the Three Good Things exercise, participants on one study engaging in this behaviour for a week reported higher levels of well-being six months later.

Hope training

Career choice literature has generally assumed that finding the 'right' career is the key to work satisfaction. Positive psychology challenges this single-tracked view, and suggests (e.g. Harter and Gurley, 2008) that there are people who are more or less likely to be satisfied in work, rather than that job satisfaction is contingent on people finding the 'right' job for them. One implication of this for career coaching is that as well as trying to identify a suitable career with our clients, it's worthwhile spending time trying to work on clients' levels of hope and resilience, as this may well have an impact on their job satisfaction.

Researchers have identified a range of techniques that can be used to increase hope. Hope theory (Snyder, 1995) has three distinct elements, and the Hope Programme (Snyder, Rand, King, Feldman, & Taylor, 2002) puts forward techniques that can help at each stage. The first stage involves setting goals. One technique is to encourage people to increase the number of meaningful goals they have. This increases hope because it reduces the power that any one missed goal has to decrease one's overall levels of hope. The next step in building hope is described as 'agency thought', which involves clients believing that their actions have a real impact on their own future; encouraging clients to enhance their agency thought

will increase their confidence in their own abilities to achieve their goals. Individuals need to re-examine their goals to ensure that they are all meaningful to them, and at an appropriate level of challenge: too slight a challenge, and the goal may not motivate; too great a challenge and it may result in de-motivating failure. Cognitive behavioural coaching techniques (e.g. Whitten, 2009) can help clients deal with any self-limiting beliefs that may reduce their chances of meeting their goals, and to replace negative self-talk ('I'll never manage it') with positive, performance-enhancing statements ('I could do it'). The final stage of the Hope Programme involves identifying specific sub-goals that form 'pathways' leading up to the ultimate goal. Career coaches could use techniques such as story-boarding to help clients identify these sub-goals.

Conclusions and directions for future research

Positive psychology is generating a substantial and growing body of credible, empirical research. The links between positive psychology and career coaching have been articulated in this paper and there are clearly contributions to both the theory and praxis of career coaching that positive psychology can make. As positive psychology continues to develop, our understanding of what constitutes a fulfilled work life, and the factors that contribute to one, will develop with it. We will benefit particularly from research that links concepts such as job satisfaction, meaning at work and work engagement to the career context and the particular issues facing our key client groups. A further focus not just on the antecedents of career well-being but on the effectiveness of specific techniques to use within a career coaching setting would be of great benefit to our clients. The potential advantages of closer academic links between the specialisms are bilateral and a century of career development theory and evidence can provide positive psychologists with a valuable springboard for their career research.

For many career practitioners, the ideas contained within this paper will be old friends. Supporting clients to find meaning and fulfilment in their careers is a core ideal for most, if not all career practitioners, even if the term 'positive psychology' is new; but

positive psychology has covered a lot of theoretical and practical ground since its introduction thirteen years ago, and we as career practitioners should welcome the idea that such a popular and high profile new academic branch is prolific in its publication of evidence and practical techniques directly applicable to our field.

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