



## Research Article

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# Social Workers' Career Development Competencies in Kuwait

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## Abstract

*This study analyzed social workers' career development competencies data collected in Kuwait. A changed working environment raised new requirements for employees. In today's society, they are fully responsible for their career development and have to be able to manage it. Career development involves values expression, decision-making style, the person's creation of a career pattern, self-concepts, and integration of life roles that reflect their life roles. Therefore, a changed working environment highlights career development as one of the most important competencies of employee. Cultural dimensions and the Middle Eastern worldview will be considered while analyzing the data.*

**Keywords:** *career development, social workers, competence*

## 1. Introduction

Social workers' careers have been investigated in many different aspects: job satisfaction (Marriott, Sexton, & Staley, 1993), occupational stress (Bradley &

Sutherland, 1995; Jone, Fletcher, & Ibbetson, 1991; Lansbergis, 2006; Moriarty & Murray, 2007), career and well-being (Graham, Shier, 2009). However, career development and its competencies have not been researched yet. This paper discusses empirical research results of a study on social workers' career competencies, which contributes to the works of Bradley and Sutherland (1995), gender related issues (Zunz, 1991), career patterns and outcomes (Biggerstaff, 2000; Collins, 1994; Curtis, Moriarty, & Netten, 2009; Lyons, Valle, & Grimwood, 1995).

## 2. Theoretical Aspects of the Career Development Competencies

### 2.1 Different Career Concepts

The word 'career' has been used in many different ways, which are best reflected by the historical retrospection of this concept in the Western capitalistic societies. The Encyclopaedia of Career Development (Greenhaus & Callanan, 2006) indicates that the term *career* comes from a Latin word *carraria* and has the original meaning of: 1) a path or a running trail; 2) a track or movement of people, horses, hawks, and heavenly bodies; 3) a course of action, the direction. Such etymological evolution of the term shows its rich historical past.

From a historical perspective, during the Reformation Evangelic career development was related to *vocation*. In the sociological literature, this term is usually associated with Weber's (2001) concept of vocation, which is based on the definition of vocation developed by Luther who perceived work as a way to worship God, i.e., as the God's "calling" or the fulfilment of a divine vocation. It should represent the will of God for a person in public life as well as in a certain working area. Today, a vocation is rarely associated with the theological sense; it is more often identified with the necessary self-knowledge for the adoption of appropriate career decisions.

The first half of the twentieth century was dominated by the meaning of *the vocational guidance*. Its main principles were as follows (Parsons, 1909, quot. acc. to Reardon et al., 2000): 1) *know yourself*: through interviews and various psychometric tests the personal characteristics (interests, abilities, skills, values, goals, attitudes, advantages, disadvantages, etc.), as well as the origin, background, qualifications and so on shall be evaluated; 2) *know the profession*: all possible opportunities of learning, in-service training, employment, compensation, etc. shall be studied; 3) *combine one with another*: using thorough and accurate arguments and based on the previously gathered information, advise on which the best choice would be made shall be offered, i.e., offer the most suitable job vacancies that would correspond to an individual's personal characteristics. Consequently, the main purpose of the vocational guidance is the specific person's adaptation to a particular work place, along with the occupation.

Despite the different social and economic changes that have occurred over the last century, this principle (in fact, significantly developed and expanded for the career, not

just a profession) is still applicable today in the career service system of the Western capitalistic societies. For example, a three-step principle, *know yourself, know the environment, and plan a career*, is still applied in the majority of the career skills training programs in the USA, Canada, Australia, and other countries.

Bureaucratic organizations with a clear hierarchical pyramid and clear chain of command emerged in the industrialized Western societies in the 50s. The careers in those organizations were defined accordingly as organizational (also known as traditional, bureaucratic) careers. The *organizational career* is characterized by a long-term and secure work place, professional stability, linear hierarchical promotion, loyalty to one organization, diverse reward mechanisms, employment based on the acquired profession, etc.

Organizational careers are based on a *hierarchy*, where there is a competition for the limited promotion potential. A vertical career progress from the bottom upwards is understood as the most important success indication of the career (Rosinaite, 2019). A typical definition of the organizational career states that this career has a clear one-dimensional or linear progress, i.e., promotion (Lips-Wiersma & Hall, 2007).

Due to the changes in a social, economic, demographic, technological, and organizational context in which individuals pursue career, a new concept of career is identified, namely *the concept of individual career*. The restructuring trend that had emerged in the capitalist world in the 1980s has resulted in the transition of a stable career to a more dynamic, more flexible and unstable career. The linear careers became multidirectional (Lips-Wiersma & Hall, 2007).

Western theorists who are interested in career as an object of scientific study have introduced a number of terms related to the concept of the individual career and defined various new forms of career, presenting a better understanding of the concept of the individual career. Each author's approach to individual career is somewhat different (Rosinaite, 2017). The following concepts of the individual career have recently become popular in the scientific literature: *new career* (Arnold & Jackson, 1997), *post-corporate career* (Peiperl & Baruch, 1997), *intelligent career* (Arthur et al., 1995). However, the most common are *protean career* (Hall, 1976) and *boundaryless career* (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). This paper analyzes social workers' individual career development competencies in Kuwait.

## 2.2 Career development significance

In industrialized countries, where knowledge-based industries are expanding rapidly, labor market demands are changing accordingly. Validity of knowledge is short, and constant learning becomes necessity. Individuals who know their career goals, skills, and knowledge are likely to succeed (Brown, 2007; Kummerow, 2004).

Another important requirement for today's employee is to be able to react according to the changing environment. Ability to notice dangers and opportunities on

time becomes a strategic competitive advantage for the organization. None of the existing latest technologies helps avoid bankruptcy. If the core of organization is not flexible, employees will lack responsibility and creativity, and make decisions slowly (Baruch, 2006; Child, 2006). Employee's ability to work independently should not be undervalued in the global economy (Baruch, 2004; Brown, 2007; Child, 2006; Kummerow, 2004).

### *2.3 Career development competencies*

Summing up all defined concepts used in this paper, it can be stated that career development competencies are knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to manage life and work experiences. Based on this definition, successful career development is something that can be learned. High career development competencies include skills and abilities to make right career decisions for individual – choose qualification, workplace, type of job, working hours' layout, making professional network, retraining, life-long learning etc. With the help of well-trained career development competencies, person can identify career goals that match best one's personality; subsequently, he/she can balance them with the opportunities in the labor market (Guichard, 2001, 2005; Knasel, et al., 2000; Richard, 2005; Sampson, et al., 2004; White, 2007). Career development competencies are universal for all specialties and qualifications in market economy.

It is worth mentioning that more recent studies have used the term "competency" to describe personal abilities reflected at certain behavior level. High competency in this case refers to an individual's ability to perform respectively to the certain level of required competency (Widdett&Hollyforde, 2003 a, 2003 b). Meantime, the term "competence" defines specific work related factors that are necessary to successfully perform the required behavior. High perceived competence is understood as the ability to perform well in work related tasks required by the organization (Widdett&Hollyforde, 2003 a, 2003 b). This paper uses the term "competency" because it is appropriately linked to individuals rather than to specific job tasks.

## **3. Social Work in Kuwait**

There are approximately 3300 qualified social workers in Kuwait. All social workers have Bachelors in Social work. Social work is practiced in different organizations in Kuwait, which are mostly governmental (belonging to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Interior) and few are private ones. Government organizations include schools, hospitals, prisons, and different social welfare institutions for people with intellectual disabilities, elderly, orphans, and delinquents (Annual Statistical Abstract, 2020).

## 4. Empirical Research

### 4.1 Research methodology

The aim of our research was to assess the level of social workers' career development competencies in Kuwait. For this purpose, quantitative survey was conducted with 242 social workers.

In the survey, career development competencies from National Career Development Guidelines (NCDG) developed by National Career Development Association in 1989 and renewed in 2003 were evaluated. The permission to use the NCDG was received from project leader Mrs. Linda Kobylarz. 303 questionnaires were distributed as a hard copies, 242 questionnaires were returned completed.

## 5. Results and Discussion

Respondents were asked to provide demographic information on age, sex, marital status, number of children, level of education, and level of income (Table 1: Demographic categories of the respondents). A total of 242 questionnaires were completed, with response rate of 80%. Respondents came from six Kuwait districts: Al Asima (Kuwait City), Hawalli, Al Ahmadi, Al Farwaniya, Al Jahra, and Mubarak Al Kabeer. Overall, 84% of the respondents were females and 16% were males. More than half (56%) of the social workers were between 26-35 years old, 16 % were between 21-25 years old, and 28% were 36 years old or older. Most of them (76%) were married, 19% were single, 3% were divorced, the rest (2%) were widowed. Furthermore, 22% of the respondents had no children, 35% had 1 to 2 children, 32% had 3-4 children, and 11% had 5 or more children. Most social workers (90%) had a bachelor degree, 5% had a Masters degree, and 3% had a PhD degree. Most social workers (74%) worked at institutions of the Ministry of Education (mainly schools), 5% worked at institutions belonging to the Ministry of Interior, 4% worked at institutions belonging to the Ministry of Social Affairs, 4% worked at institutions belonging to the Ministry of Justice, 3% worked at institutions belonging to the Ministry of Health, and the rest (10 %) worked for different universities in Kuwait. Most social workers (66%) had a monthly salary of 555-999 KWD, 21% earned 1000-1499 KWD, 3% earned 1500-1999 KWD, and the rest (10%) earned 2000 KWD or more.

**Table 1:** Demographic categories of the respondents

Gender	%
Male	16
Female	84
Age groups	%
21-25	16
26-35	56
36 +	28

<b>Marital status</b>	%
Married	76
Single	19
Divorced	3
Widowed	2
<b>Number of children</b>	%
0	22
1 or 2	35
3 or 4	32
5+	11
<b>Education</b>	%
Bachelor degree	90
Master degree	5
PhD degree	3
Others	2
<b>Work place</b>	%
Ministry of Education	74
Ministry of Interior	5
Ministry of Social Affairs	4
Ministry of Justice	4
Ministry of Health	3
Universities in Kuwait	10
<b>Salary</b>	%
555-999 KWD	66
1000-1499 KWD	21
1500-1999 KWD	3
2000 KWD and more	10

Personal development domain included four statements, which were evaluated very high in the survey (Fig. 1). Most respondents feel very competent about building and maintaining positive self-concept (92%) as well as developing positive interpersonal skills (95%). In addition, they managed to integrate growth and change into their career development (88%) and balance different roles in their lives (88%).

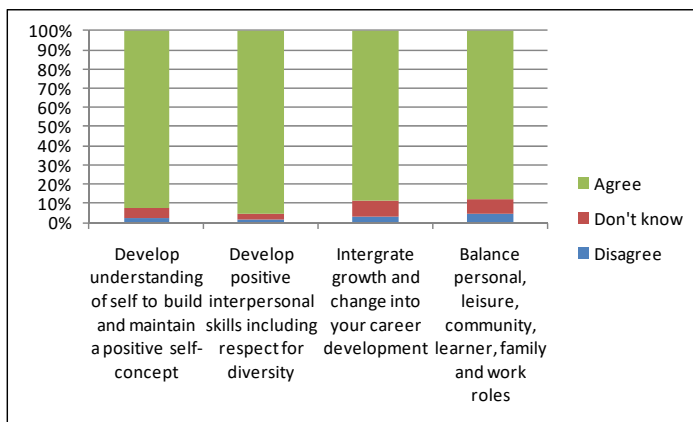
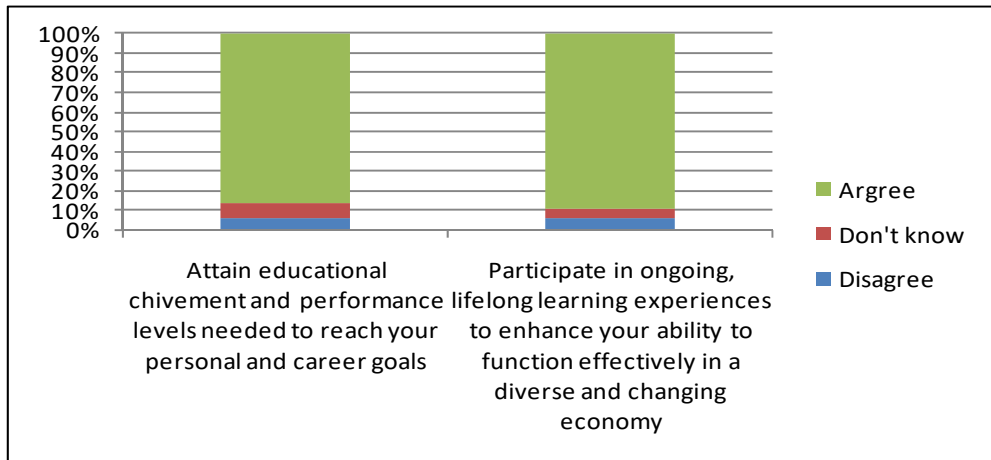


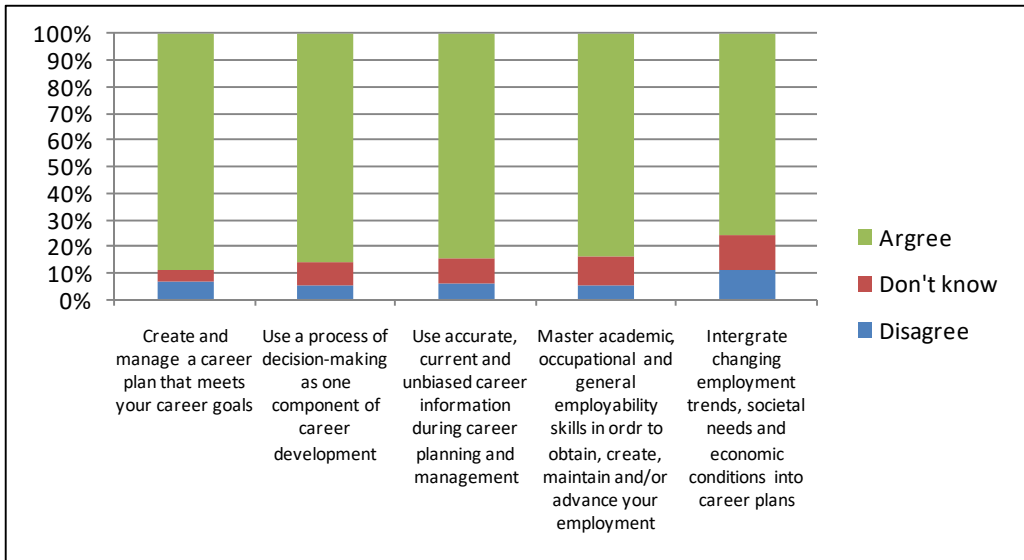
Figure 1: Personal social development domain

Educational achievement and lifelong learning domain comprised two statements, which respondents evaluated high (Fig. 2). Their personal and career goals were described as adequate to the educational achievement (87%), and the respondents (89%) evaluated the importance of lifelong learning in the effective adaptation to the changing economy positively.



**Figure 2:** Educational achievement and lifelong learning domain

Career management domain included 5 statements all of which were evaluated high in the survey, but lower compared to other two groups of career development competencies (Fig. 3). The integration of changing employment trends, societal needs, and economic conditions into career plans seemed to be the most difficult task, although 76% of participants felt positive about integration. Most respondents felt very comfortable creating and managing their own career plans to meet their career goals (89%). Furthermore, 84% indicated that they use accurate information when planning and managing career and 86% indicated that they use process of decisions making as one component of career development. Additionally, 84% of the respondents mastered employability skills in order to obtain, create, maintain and/or advance their employment.



**Figure 3:** Career management domain

As the discussion above has shown, surprisingly all career competencies were evaluated very positively, which means that all survey participants have very well developed competencies related to the self-knowledge, lifelong learning, career planning, decision making, or other to career development related aspects. Or social desirability effects may have biased respondents' answers. In short, all respondents represented themselves either as if they are masters of their career development or how they want to be seen as professionals from the point of view of society.

As a result of this, it can be stated that the respondents choose right career for themselves, which might lead to constantly increasing technical competencies, high level of job satisfaction, motivation to participate in life-long learning, organizational success and relevant recognition in their profession.

The fact that the non representative convenience sample was used in the data collection for this survey has to be taken into consideration while interpreting data of this article, because it may not represent the population of Kuwaiti social workers. The reason of choosing the above mentioned sample technique was based on the lack of the structure of social workers' population and its limited accessibility.

## 6. Conclusion

All social workers' career development competencies were evaluated as very high by the respondents in Kuwait. It could mean that all social workers have mastered career development in today's world or that their answers were influenced by their



cultural attitudes or social desirability factors. The lack of variability in answers and one-sided (only positive) answers in the survey seem to suggest that cultural attitudes related to one's reputation in the public, lack of data anonymity trust, taking questions too personally as if they are questioning one's competence might have influenced respondents answers; therefore, they might not reflect exactly the reality of social workers career development competencies in Kuwait. However, this information is also valuable, contributing to the sparse empirical social research field.

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