TOP WORKERS' VIRTUES AND STRENGTHS

Satu Uusiautti, and Kaarina Määttä,
Faculty of Education, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland

Abstract

What virtues and strengths are required for succeeding at work? This research was focused on Finnish top workers (awarded as "the best workers" of their professional fields among colleagues) and their assessments of their virtues and strengths needed for success at work. The data were collected through qualitative interviews. The aim was to decipher what strengths and virtues top workers consider as the most important? According to the research, top workers emphasize the positive and optimistic working attitude and good social relationships at work. However, they evaluated "wisdom and knowledge" as the virtue that characterized them the best. This research approaches the phenomenon from a positive perspective. In addition, the connection between these virtues and wellbeing, happiness, and success at work is discussed. The results contribute new directions for the development of vocational education: how to organize and structure education so that it would support people's success in working life.

Keywords: human strengths, human virtues, top workers, success at work, vocational education

1. Introduction
1.1. Some perspectives on love, happiness, and wellbeing at work

Developing interventions to increase happiness is a major focus of positive psychology [1]. At the subjective level, positive psychology concentrates on subjective experiences, wellbeing, satisfaction, flow, joy, pleasure, and happiness, as well as on optimistic and hopeful attitude and confidence in the future. At the group level, the interest is in the civil skills and institutions that make the individuals turn into better citizens – responsible, flexible, and ethical workers [2].

Those characteristics of work that enhance efficient and engaged working have been illustrated in many ways [3]. For example, Hackman and Oldham's [4] job characteristics model describes meaningful work as it is related to jobs with characteristics such as task variety, identity and significance, feedback, and autonomy. However, individuals' perceptions of their jobs do not depend entirely on the objective characteristics of the job: for example, high-quality leadership has the potential to positively influence employees' perceptions of the meaning of their work and thus affect also their psychological well-being [5, 6]. Arnold et al. [5] point out that *"it is possible that humanistic work values (the normative beliefs individuals hold about whether work should be meaningful) is an important influence on the likelihood of finding meaning in current work and psychological well-being"*. In addition, Cadwell and Dixon [7] have defined love, forgiveness, and trust as organizational constructs that are freedom producing, empowering, and vital to enhancing employee self-efficacy.

Happiness and satisfaction must be understood as the outcome of an interaction process between individual characteristics and aspirations on the one side, and social relations and macro-social structures on the other side [8]. Likewise, according to Lyubomirsky et al.'s [9] research, positive affect is associated with multiple positive outcomes including better performance ratings at work, higher salaries, and improved health.

Turner, Barling, and Zacharatos [10] have introduced the healthy work model (HWM). This heuristic model explains how to create healthy work systems. The model presents the characteristics of a healthy work: work practices, positive psychological processes and mechanisms, as well as various health-related outcomes. Healthy work systems require good external

environments and develop strategies of good work practices (e.g. autonomy, teamwork, and leadership) that enhance positive psychological processes and other mechanisms (e.g. trust, perceived control, organizational commitment) in order to raise healthy outcomes (e.g. well-being and proactivity).

Happiness not only produces a quantitative improvement by increasing efficiency but also a qualitative one by making a better product or outcome by virtue of pride, belief, and commitment to one's job[11]. In this article, we seize on the phenomena of happiness and wellbeing at work by studying the virtues and strengths of the Finnish employees of the year. The starting point in this article is the finding that the top workers had strong positive feelings towards work and emphasized wellbeing at work as one of the most important features that enhance success at work[12]. In addition, they assessed their personal characteristics, their virtues and strengths, as workers. What are the top workers' most important virtues and strengths and how do these features connect with happiness and wellbeing at work?

1.2.   Human strengths and virtues

Recently, more and more attention has been paid on studying human virtues[13]. Now, the research concentrating on human weaknesses has to compete with strong interest in human abilities, healthy aptitudes, and virtues. Researchers have become conscious that people's experiences can be studied from this perspective as well and not just in a way that is oriented towards flaws and conditions[14].

After having read all kinds of categorizations about human virtues—starting from Aristotle and Plato, the Old Testament to the Talmud, Buddha, Bushido and the Boy Scouts—Seligman and Peterson and their research group managed to define six virtues that seemed to be common in all these above-mentioned views. The virtues were Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Justice, Temperance, Spirituality and transcendence, and Love and humanity.[15]

The concept of human strengths can be considered as contextually dynamic because the function of a specific behavior depends on its context and its outcome. In addition, contexts are dynamic and change during an individual's life span. The concept of human strengths is also norm-dependent because the fundamental features of a society involve common knowledge about appropriate and appreciated behavior.[16]

According to Baltes and Freund[16], the concept of human strengths is 1) dynamic and unbound to context from the point of view of adaptation or general mechanism, 2) represents the state of life-long learning and flexible life-management, 3) regulates the direction of the goals in individual development as well as the ways with which the goals will be achieved, and 4) not only supports individuals' development but also makes them more efficient participators for creating common good.

Virtues can be dissected from a variety of viewpoints. Synchronic perspective tries to explain an individual's behavior based on the psychological and biological orientations at a certain moment. Whereas diachronic point of view is interested in those developmental processes that have led to the prevailing behavior. This perspective focuses on the behavior in a certain moment as a part of an individual's developmental history. In diachronic models, individual development, the timing and emergence of important happenings in one's environment, as well as the manners how these factors interact in the course of time.[13]

Seligman et al.[17] have listed strengths and virtues that enhance people's productivity. The CVS-model (Character, Strengths and Virtues) was used in this research as a tool for the top workers when they had to describe their virtues and strengths.

2.   Method
2.1.   Employees of the Year as Informants

In this research, participants presented top workers from different occupations. All of them were nominated as "Employees of the Year" by Finnish labor unions as most of the Finnish workers are members in a labor union of their own field. These recognized top workers were considered as representatives of successful workers as well as suitable informants for describing their experiences of success at work. Also, this procedure ensures that there are public justifications for selecting participants, and thus, naming successful employees was not the researchers' personal choice. The criteria for the award of "Employee of the year" were found concerning 20 occupations (these occupations are introduced in Methods-chapter), of which the participants were also retrieved. The criteria were mostly found in the internet, but some of them were inquired from labor unions by email.

Next, we will shortly introduce how top workers were described in the criteria for "Employees of the Year". In different occupations, the award emphasized different things which could be categorized into three groups. Firstly, high professional standard was named as one of the most important qualities among the top workers. In this theme, top know-how was appreciated referring not only to the great quality of work but also to the ability to develop one's work and skills in an active way. The following occupations represented the best this theme: Priest, Police Officer, Nurse, and Psychologist. The second group consisted of employees' actual actions to make their work and occupation noted as well as their attempts to make their occupational field more appreciated for example by paying attention to the contents of occupation, discussing current topics of their occupational field in public, and make Finnish proficiency famous also abroad. For example, the criteria for Artisan of the Year, Journalist of the Year and Athlete of the Year typified this theme. The difference between these two themes is that in the first one, experts from different occupations develop their field through their own professional development while the second one emphasizes the publicity gained by an employee's proficiency.

Part of the rewarded employees was not selected by their colleagues but by competing against each others. These competitions could differ remarkably by occupation (e.g. Chef of the Year, Cleaner of the Year). However, one thing was in common: namely, professional skills were evaluated from several sectors that depict occupational core know-how. In other words, only a true professional can win this kind of competition and thus, also those employees who had been nominated by a competition were asked to participate in this research. Furthermore, employees who have been selected for these competitions from their work place had already been nominated by their colleagues in this sense.

In addition to the above mentioned three themes, the criteria for this kind of reward can be studied by the specific words describing "Employees of the Year". Three different categories could be found: attributes that describe top workers, action-related attributes, and profession-specific qualifiers. The most common attributes were adjectives such as competent, innovative, punctual, celebrated, effective, open-minded, and social. Action-related descriptions covered factors such as developing work and occupation, improving one's occupation, making one's occupation noted in Finland and abroad, dedicating to one's occupation, and active co-operation. Profession-specific qualifiers were language proficiency, tidiness, know-how, taking care of well-being at work, punctuality, a well-functioning business idea, and courage to create new ideas, co-operating skills, and service skills. Top workers' attributes were basically just words that described employees irrespective of occupation. Action-related attributes paid attention to how employee had been working or what an employee had done in order to earn the nomination. Profession-specific qualifiers referred directly to occupation and specific profession-bound skills. Thus, one qualifier could describe several occupations but in different meaning, e.g. tidiness.

It was interesting to notice that the criteria of "Employee of the Year" did not differ very much from field to field. The aim of this introduction was to give an idea about what kind of

characteristics were emphasized and brought out in the criteria. Nevertheless, it is worth pondering how much this actually framed the picture of successful employees that is formed by this research, as "Employees of the Year" were and still are mainly selected by their own labor unions. In addition, a certain group of people has also composed the criteria. For example, making one's occupation noted can actually act for the unions and thus influence on someone's selection. And what about an employee's social skills: supposedly, social persons could be seen as more appealing for those who are selecting "Employees of the Year"?

Still, crucial thing is that "Employees of the Year" are nonetheless top workers rewarded in their own field. Thus, they represent certainly some kind of group of successful and excellent workers.

2.2. The Data and Analyses

The original research was a two-phased mixed-method[18, 19] research[12]. In the second phase, on which this article concentrates, the data was collected through narrative interviews in 2007. The employees of the year that were interviewed in the second phase (N = 8) were nominated between the years 2005 and 2006. Participants were between 36 and 64-years-old (mean = 49). These top workers were asked to describe their course of life in relation with their success at work. Furthermore, they were asked to consider their main strengths and virtues as workers in their own words but also by using the CVS-model[17]. In addition, the interviewees had to name three strengths that they considered as representing the best themselves.

Narrative research can be defined as a research that utilizes or analyses narrative data collected by narratives (e.g. biographies) or other ways (e.g. anthropologists' observational narratives). Thus, narratives can be either a research object or means to study a phenomenon.[20] Narrative research does not focus on objective and—generalized facts but local, personal, and subjective information this is actually considered as strength in narrative research because informants' voice can be heard in a more authentic way[21]. Narratives can also be used when analyzing the reasons for acts. In this research, narrative interview was complemented with characteristics of theme interview, to serve best this research, aiming at a *thick description* of the phenomenon of success at work[22].

An analysis of narratives and narrative analysis were done. In this research, analysis was made by narrative structuring that pursues to contribute a cohesive narrative of experiences and events during interviews[23]. Also, the analysis can be seen as category-content focused approach where parts of narrative are categorized into different categories[20].

As the top workers used Seligman et al.'s classification of virtues and strengths for describing themselves as workers, the categorization structure for analysis was already available. Their strengths and virtues were analyzed based on this model.[17]

In addition, those strengths that the top workers recognized in them selves and that were not included in Seligman's model were taken into consideration. Those strengths were grouped from the interview data. Top workers mentioned the same kinds of features and therefore, a few appeared as common to them and are thus, presented in this article as well.

Additionally, the fact that top workers did recognize several other strengths besides the ones presented in Seligman's model can be also discussed when evaluating the functionality of the CVS-model. According to this research, the model did not appear all-embracing but had some weaknesses or at least things to reconsider. For example, some of the strengths were found difficult to understand as actual strengths (e.g. religiousness) but merely as features that some people have and others do not. In addition, top workers emphasized their optimistic attitude which was not included the model but, indeed, could be considered as a strength. Of course, the original model focuses on human beings in general whereas in this research it was evaluated by top workers when they analyzed themselves as workers. However, using the model as a tool was seen quite helpful as

people often tend to find describing themselves with positive attributes difficult or embarrassing—usually people do not like to flatter themselves. The model gave them an idea of what kind of features they could have; however it did not prevent them from coming up with some others as well.

2.3. Research Questions

This article concentrates on the following questions:

1) What strengths and virtues did the top workers consider as the most important when considering their success at work?
2) What strengths and virtues were the most important among top workers?

3. Results
3.1. Top workers' strengths and virtues
3.1.1. Wisdom and knowledge

The virtue of wisdom and knowledge consists of cognitive strengths (creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love for learning, perspective) that relate to the abilities to acquire and use information. This virtue was the most important among the top workers. According to their own perception, wisdom and knowledge as a virtue included those strengths that described the best their passionate attitude towards learning new things, developing themselves and their occupation, as well as gathering versatile knowledge and skills. Therefore, their estimation illustrated their attitude towards working as well.

The top workers were not always able to recognize their strengths, for example when talking about creativity:*"I have thought that I am not creative at all because I have always been really bad at drawing. But still I compose music and write lyrics... and think up all kinds of gadgetry and apparatuses."* Creativity was, however, appreciated although all of the top workers did not recognize it in themselves.

Open-mindedness was associated with tolerance and courage to take part in new things. Especially, Police Officer of the Year, Psychologist of the Year, and Farmer of the Year considered open-mindedness as an important characteristic. According to the interviews, open-mindedness described all the participants as did love for learning (e.g. Nurse of the Year considered this one as his best strength) whereas creativity and curiosity did not. Curiosity was considered merely negatively: as nosiness. Perspective was every top worker's strength to some extent.

"First, I thought of some tack... The more experience you have the easier you notice that you have plenty of other options, tacks that you have to consider."

It was understood as a sort of wisdom gained by experience, in other words, the ability to look at things from different perspectives. Thus, the virtue of wisdom and knowledge described the top workers well which is supported also by the fact that none of them thought that these strengths should be improved or that they lacked one or some of these strengths.

3.1.2. Courage

The virtue of courage was defined as an emotional strength that consists of will to achieve goals regardless of inner or outer resistance. This virtue was evaluated as the second important by the top workers and they did not see any shortcomings in the strengths (authenticity, bravery, persistence, and zest) listed within this virtue. Nurse of the Year and Priest of the Year thought that authenticity was their most important strength which is, indeed, especially crucial among those professions that include working closely with other people. *"So you certainly have to be genuine when confronting people and at work in general and I think that I try to express that I am what I am and what I do..."*

Persistency as their strength was emphasized by the Police of the Year, the Psychology of the Year, and the Priest of the Year and according to the top workers, persistency was the third important strength among them. *"I can say that if I agree on taking care of something, I'll have a great need to handle it; I rarely leave tasks unfinished."*

Every top worker also considered zest as typical of them whereas bravery as a concept was seen difficult as many of them associated it with a romantic image of brave heroes. However, when defined as everyday bravery it seemed more familiar and they described it with staying strong and sticking to one's principles.

3.1.3. Humanity

The third important virtue among the top workers according to their assessments was humanity. Within this virtue, they also recognized their second important strength; namely, social intelligence. The Artisan of the Year, the Priest of the Year, the Police of the Year as well as the Nurse of the Year thought that social intelligence described them extremely well. Of course, the last three mentioned are such occupations where social intelligence can be seen as one of the basic requirements to perform well in that profession. One of the top workers paralleled social intelligence with social skills and he was of the opinion that his social skills were not perfect but should be improved. One interesting remark concerning social intelligence was made by the Artisan of the Year who pointed out that social relationships are important for success at work: *"Because you don't create your success all by yourself but it's the others who create your success"*. However, also those employees who lack social skills can be rewarded but it is completely another question whether it is more likely that social personalities become rewarded more easily or not!

3.1.4. Justice

Among the strengths (fairness, leadership, teamwork) that describe the virtue of justice, the top workers named fairness as their most important feature, especially Farmer of the Year as he considered it as a part of good leadership. Treating his employees fairly was important for creating and sustaining good working atmosphere and trust at the work place. Leadership can be defined as a leader's personal characteristics or behavior, style, and decisions[24]. However, the top workers regarded leadership merely as a skill instead of strength one should have. One of the top workers recognized shortages in her leadership skills whereas another considered it as one of his most important strengths. *"I want to be in lead and take the group forward... Yet, I am not a dictator... but I consider myself as a leader and a trend-setter in order to make good for other people as well."*

Teamwork skills varied among top workers according to their assessments. Those, who evaluated their social intelligence as good, assessed their teamwork skills the same way whereas two of the top workers who held an administrative position saw some deficiencies in their teamwork skills and one of them wanted to improve his skills.

3.1.5. Temperance

This virtue was not considered as very important, downright distant because of its connection with modesty and prudence. The top workers found it somewhat difficult to assess how this virtue and the strengths (forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation) would characterize them but after defining them persistently together during the interviews they started to have an idea which strength typifies them and which do not.

Not surprisingly, the ability to forgive did however depict all top workers to some extent. They also emphasized that one has to be able to apologize as well. According to the top workers, their forgiveness was tested by the social conflicts at work place. *"I am able to forgive and apologize... but it is hard if you are accused of something that you have not done."*

Modesty as a strength was considered paradoxical: on one hand, modesty is a desirable trait but one has to be able to be genuinely proud of one's achievements without unnecessary or excessive modesty. Some Finnish proverbs were questioned: *"'Modesty makes you prettier'* is not necessarily good for success at work but *'you would foster your own achievements'*.

However, the feeling of proud includes an assumption that one cannot be proud of something to which one has not contributed self[25.] Two of the top workers associated modesty with humbleness. *"I would like to be humble but do I want to be… the one who reaches high ends up low – this proverb has stamped us."*

In working life, unwritten emotional rules determine what emotions are approved and how, to whom, and in which situation one is allowed to express them, and how emotions are interpreted.

Half of the participants named prudence as their strength and they explained it as their special skill of deliberating their actions and making justified decisions at work. Therefore, prudence resembled merely a professional skill or a work-related strength than a personal feature unlike self-regulation that was seen as strictly personal characteristic and as a part of temperament. Half of the top workers assessed that their self-regulation could be better. *"Still there are many dimensions that could be smoothened… my nature can be stretched to many directions."*

3.1.6. Transcendence

Transcendence as a virtue was considered paradoxical as well because they did not agree with all the strengths (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, religiousness) included in this virtue. For example, religiousness was hard to imagine as strength—except for the Priest of the Year. However, the top workers did use plenty of time contemplating how appreciation of beauty and excellence is manifested in working life. They explained this virtue as the ability to recognize good performances and achievements instead of using one's energy on envying. This resembles their positive attitude and ability to understand achievements earned and valuable[26]. Gratitude was considered as gratefulness of being able to have rewarding and pleasing work. *"That lies deep in our culture that you cannot say when some other does a good thing; we haven't had such a working culture either. I want to give feedback if I see that someone is seriously doing something really great."*

One of the top workers named hope as one of her most important strengths. Hope was seen as the foundation of optimistic attitude. *"So that you believes that you'll cope with this although there are difficulties; and you'll just try again or some other route."* Indeed, hope and optimism are neighboring concepts but for example, Finnish people[27] are traditionally seen as optimistic rather than hopeful. Ojanen[27] defines hope as realistic optimism where trust is central.

The top workers appreciated humor although some of them did not consider themselves very humoristic. The ability to look at things far and see humoristic elements in them was, however, considered important. Therefore, humor helped to process problematic issues and handle tough situations. For example, the Police of the Year emphasized the meaning of humor in police work as a connective factor among police officers and when they have to confront the roughest things in their work. The Priest of the Year saw similarities in humor and religion*: "they are at least cousins if not downright siblings: both create hope in people".* In addition, humoristic people understand things widely and do not seize on details and in his opinion, religion has the same dimension.

A summary of the top workers' assessments about their virtues and strengths can be seen in table 1. They were asked to name three most important strengths: the most important got 3 three points, the second important 2, and the third important 1. All others that they mentioned as describing themselves at some degree got .5 points. Some top workers named two or three most important strengths and then all of these got three points and the others two, one, or half points. Based on their assessments, the top workers' main virtues could be calculated by summing up the points that the strengths had.

Table 1. About here

3.2. Other virtues and strengths

The top workers also named some other strength that was not included in Seligman's CVS-model. Five of them highlighted the significance of their own personality: they let their strong personality to show in their work. Many of them associated this with authenticity or being themselves. This was important for the Nurse of the Year, the Priest of the Year, and the Police of the Year. But also those who worked as supervisors emphasized the significance of acting in a genuine way and bringing out their personality. This way the followers' trust can be achieved.

Another important characteristic that most of the top workers mentioned was diligence and dedication. They thought that success at work could be achieved through industriousness. This was also such a trait that was mentioned when they were asked to name one that they would like other workers at their work community to have.

Half of the top workers emphasized their positivity and joviality. Positivity appeared as an optimistic attitude towards working. In addition, it was seen as providing resources to whole work community. Indeed, optimism is one of the most salient concepts in positive psychology. It can be defined as a steady attitude and view of life and future (Pajares, 2001).

4. Conclusions: The connection between virtues and strengths and success and wellbeing at work

Arnold, Robertson, and Cooper[24] state that awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, values and interests is of primary importance for enhancing one's career. Optimism has a clear connection to success because among other things, it involves the ability to set reasonable goals, to achieve these goals, and to use efficient learning strategies. According to Carver and Scheier[28], optimistic people achieve their goals because they organize their actions in an intellectual way in order to achieve these goals. Furthermore, the top workers appeared as proactive[29] as opposite to a reactive attitude. A proactive attitude embodies a way of thinking according to which people are able to change their behavior, look at things from various perspectives, making choices by themselves, and knowing what they want. Proactive people concentrate on things that they can affect and thus, their action is positive and more efficient by nature.

This kind of attitude can be dissected through the concept of resilience as well. According to Tugade and Fredricksson[30], there are individuals who seem to "bounce back" from negative events quite effectively, whereas others are seemingly unable to get out of their negative ruts. Being able to move on despite hardships demonstrates those successful individuals' resilience. Therefore, psychological resilience refers to effective coping and adaptation although faced with loss, hardship, or adversity—the feature that was common among the top workers as well.[30]

Of course, it is worth remembering that this was a qualitative research and the number of participants very limited but so is the number of the awarded employees of the year in such a small country as Finland is. The interviews worked out well, lasted for hours at their best, and were thorough which probably compensates the low number of participants. However, the aim of qualitative research is not generalization but merely a thick description[22]; indeed, this requirement was met in this research as the participants were willing to discuss their work and the reasons behind their success at work thoroughly and openly.

5. Discussion

The top workers emphasized the meaning of good social relationships and good atmosphere at work as well as positive experience on working. This result supports the founding in numerous studies that have shown that happy people perform better at work than people who report low wellbeing. Others benefit from this, too, because happy workers are better organizational citizens: they help other people at work in various ways. The fact that wellbeing is not only valuable because it feels good but also because it has beneficial consequences makes management of well-being imperative at work places[31]. Kaye[32] points out that happiness can be directly translated into engagement, productivity, and satisfaction—the wide definition of productive work[33].

According to Rego ET al.[34], fostering organizational virtuousness (e.g., through honesty, interpersonal respect, and compassion; combining the high standards of performance with a culture of forgiveness and learning from mistakes) improves employees' affective wellbeing and promotes a more committed workforce. Considering these findings and mirroring the growing contributions of the positive psychology[17, 35, 36] it seems clear that a "positive-people-management" perspective should be considered, both by practitioners and scholars.

The strengths that the top workers recognized the most in themselves—open-mindedness, social intelligence, persistence, optimism and authenticity—all relate to positive behavior. If these features explain success at work, at least partly, wellbeing and happiness are the most certainly not irrelevant things at the work place. Furthermore, it is worth considering how people's (signature) strengths could be developed already in education phase as they are important for success at work. Perhaps, positive approaches to education such as employing pedagogical love in teaching and later on love-based leadership in working life could be key factors to enhance this kind of positive development that leads to overall well-being[37].

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Table 1. The top workers' virtues and strengths (Uusiautti, 2008, 213).

Virtues and strengths	Points
1. Wisdom and knowledge	34,5
Creativity	4,5
Curiosity	6,5
Open-mindedness	11,5
Love of learning	6,5
Perspective	5,5
2. Courage	23,5
Authenticity	5,5
Bravery	2
Persistence	10
Zest	6
3. Humanity	18,5
Kindness	5,5
Love	2,5
Social intellisgence	10,5
4. Justice	10,5
Fairness	4,5
Leadership	2,5
Teamwork	3,5
5. Temperance	9,5
Forgiveness	3,5
Modesty	2
Prudence	2
Self-regulation	2
6. Trancendence	16,5
Appreciation of beauty and excellence	3
Gratitude	3
Hope	6
Humor	2,5
Religiousness	2