SWOT Analysis for Individuals\_060313

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Abstract

A SWOT (an acronym for **S**trength**, W**eaknesses**, O**pportunities, and **T**hreats) framework is commonly used by *organizations* as part of their strategic planning process and assists firms in their decision-making, strategizing, and goal setting as they evaluate their internal strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis external environmental threats and opportunities they face. Because of the success of SWOT analyses in business, this article encourages human resource professionals and employment counselors to consider SWOT analyses in which workers identify their strengths after evaluating their skills, knowledge, abilities, and experience. Persons are then asked to do the same for their weaknesses and which may place them at a disadvantage relative to others. They are invited to also examine career opportunities and then consider anything which might threaten such opportunities and list these separately. Factors to consider in using this popular organizational analytical tool with individuals are presented followed by a discussion of some misuses of SWOT analyses.

SWOT Analysis for Individuals

Those with keen understanding of their strengths and needs are in
much better position than those with limited or faulty self-knowledge.
In such circumstances, I would hazard, accurate self-knowledge is
worth at least 15 to 25 IQ points – and that’s a lot!

 —Howard Gardner, Author of *Frames of Mind*

The world of work has become less predictable and more uncertain for organizations. To deal with this situation and to help ensure their survival and growth, firms have heightened their interest in strategic planning during recent years (Bateman & Snell, 2004). It is performed on regular basis by both profit and not-for-profit organizations and involves examining the appropriateness of a business’s mission and for positioning an organization to deal with potential challenges in the future. Strategic planning is important because it can make a difference in how well a business performs. Such strategies become the plans for how firms do what they are in business to do, how they will compete successfully, and how they will attract and satisfy customers in order to achieve their goals.

In a personal context, individuals in their personal or professional life must also plan and consider what strategies will help them be successful and ensure their occupational survival. This is particularly important as researchers have noted that employees must take more control of their careers and look out for their employability (Callanan & Greenhaus, 1999). This emphasis has given rise to the protean (derived from the Greek god Proteus, who could change shape at will) or boundaryless career that is person driven (Briscoe, & Hall, 2006). Such a career is said to be reinvented by employees from time to time, as they and the environment change. Pursuing this career requires a high level of self-awareness and personal responsibility as suggested in the paper’s opening quote.

One strategic management planning technique widely used in industry and extensively taught in business schools is SWOT analysis which stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. It is a simple yet powerful model managers and business students use to analyze the strategic positions of companies, products, or business situations which enables proactive thinking, rather than relying on habitual or instinctive reactions. Unfortunately, this key tool in the strategic planning process has not been extensively used in career planning even though its self-assessment feature is an important step in most career development efforts. Hence, this article provides an in-depth review of this common organizational strategy framework and illustrates how this technique can be utilized by career development professionals. This is done by first discussing strategic planning and SWOT analysis in business followed by its proposed use with individuals in career development contexts. Finally, problems arising from SWOT misuse are then discussed and a summary is provided.

Strategic Planning

Figure 1 presents six major components of the strategic management process (Bateman & Snell, 2004) often used in businesses: (1) establishment of mission, vision, and goals; (2) analysis of external opportunities and threats; (3) analysis of internal strengths and weaknesses; (4) SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis and strategy formulations; (5) strategy implementation; and (6) strategic control. These are briefly discussed below.

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Step 1: Establishment of mission, vision, and goals. The first step in the strategic planning is establishing a mission, vision, and goals for the organization. The mission is the basic purpose and values of the firm, as well as its scope of operations. It is a statement of the organization’s reason for existing. The mission statement also describes the key values by which the firm will operate. The vision of the firm moves beyond the mission statement to provide a perspective on where the company is headed and what the organization can become in the future. It is also important for managers to identify the current goals and strategies so that they have a basis for assessing whether they need to be changed.

Step 2: Analysis of internal strengths and weaknesses. The mission and vision drive the second component of the strategic management: analysis of the internal environment. Internal analysis provides strategic decision makers with an inventory of the organization’s skills, resources, capabilities, and core competencies as well as its overall and functional performance levels. Any activities the organization does well or any unique resources it has are called strengths. Weaknesses are activities the organization does not do well or resources it needs but does not possess.

Step 3: Analysis of external opportunities and threats. At the same time the internal analysis is conducted, the external opportunities and threats facing the business are assessed. Opportunities are positive trends in the external environment; threats are negative trends. Once they have analyzed the environment, managers need to pinpoint opportunities that the organization can exploit and threats that they must counteract or buffer against. The combined internal and external analyses (Steps 2 and 3) are collectively called a **SWOT** analysis.

Step 4: SWOT analysis and strategy formulation. After completing a SWOT analysis, managers then formulate appropriate strategies. SWOT analysis helps executives summarize the major facts and forecasts derived from the external and internal analyses. Strategy formulation builds on SWOT analysis to utilize the strengths of the organization in order to capitalize on opportunities, counteract threats, and alleviate internal weaknesses. Strategy formulation moves from simply analysis to devising a coherent course of action.

Step 5: Strategy implementation. As with any plan, formulating the appropriate strategy is not enough. Strategic managers also must ensure that the new strategies are implemented effectively and efficiently. Prescient executives realize that clever techniques and a good plan do not guarantee success, and attention must be directed to implementation and execution.

Step 6: Evaluating results. The final component of the strategic management process is strategic control. This supports managers in evaluating the organization’s progress with its strategy and, when discrepancies exist, taking corrective action. As with all control systems, the organization must develop performance indicators, an information system, and specific mechanisms to monitor progress.

Research has found a generally positive relationship between strategic planning and performance (Cho & Pucik, 2005; Nohria, Joyce, & Roberson, 2003; Roberto, 2004). Another reason strategic planning is vital has to do with the fact that managers in organizations of all types and sizes face continually changing situations. They cope with this uncertainty by using the strategic management process to examine relevant factors and decide what actions to take. Because the major thrust of this paper involves a review of the SWOT analysis, it is discussed in greater detail below.

*SWOT Analysis*

The idea behind a SWOT analysis is for managers in the firm to carefully assess both the opportunities and threats that exist in a firm’s environment and the strengths and weaknesses that exist within the organization. The managers then attempt to use the firm’s strengths to capitalize on environmental opportunities and to cope with environmental threats. Strengths are also used to offset weaknesses within the organizations. Ideally, a SWOT analysis helps a company determine how to increase internal strengths and minimize internal weaknesses while maximizing external opportunities and minimizing external threats. Generally, a SWOT analysis serves to uncover the optimal match between the internal strengths and weaknesses of a given firm and the environmental trends (opportunities and threats) that the business must fact in the marketplace. This is accomplished by assessing how strengths may be leveraged to realize opportunities and how weakness, which exacerbate threats or impede progress, may be overcome (Hofer & Schendel, 1978; Thompson & Strickland, 1998).

The SWOT framework was developed by Learned, Christiansen, Andrews, and Guth (1969) from earlier efforts at the Harvard Business School to explore case studies. Classified as the key component of the Design School of Strategy by Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (1998), the SWOT analysis quickly became the standard approach to analyzing internal and external organizational environments. The SWOT has essentially remained unchanged even though many models and frameworks have emerged. It is considered by some to be the most important and remains perhaps the most well-known strategic planning tool (Dyson, 2002; Hindle, 1994). This tool helps examine the organization’s current performance (strengths and weaknesses) and the organization’s future (opportunities and threats) by accounting for the factors that exist in the external environment.

According to Barney (1995), SWOT is a simple framework that points to the importance of external and internal forces for the purpose of understanding the sources of competitive advantage. It is a preliminary analytical tool that must be supplemented with rigorous competitive, resource, financial and organizational analysis. SWOT helps decide whether the main problems facing an organization revolve around a need to revise strategy, a need to improve strategy implementation, or both. SWOT can be a rich and prompt tool that helps explore new possibilities and initiate new programs (Chermack & Kasshanna, 2007). It is a dynamic process for decision-making and is actually a form of brainstorming in that it looks at future possibilities for the organization through a systematic approach into both positive and negative concerns (Balamuralikrishna & Dugger, 1995). When used properly, SWOT analysis can help find the best match between environmental trends (opportunities and threats) and internal capabilities. An effective strategy is one that takes advantage of the organization’s opportunities by employing its strengths and wards off threats by avoiding them or by correcting or compensating for weaknesses.

SWOT and Career Development

While SWOT is a powerful and oftentimes highly successful technique with respect to organizations, it may also be valuable when applied to individuals and their careers (David, 1997). Careers have increasingly become boundaryless (Nauta, Van Vianen, Van der Heijden, Van Dam, & Willemsen, 2009); more boundaries (e.g. occupational, departmental, and organizational) are crossed in comparison with earlier and more predictable hierarchical careers (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996; Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2000). Hence, employees need to be focused on their adaptability for attaining a job within or outside their organization. As such, employability has been considered an alternative to job security (Forrier & Sels, 2003) and refers to the likelihood of obtaining and retaining a job (DeCuyper, Van Der Heijden, & Wittekind, 2012). It is considered a critical requirement for individuals who aim for career success (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

More and more career development systems focus on employability (Bernardin, 2003) and individuals are advised not to worry about holding onto a specific job, but rather they should make sure they have developed the competitive skills needed in the marketplace. They need to have portable competencies (Arthur, 1994). One way to help ensure that this happens is to implement a strategic management process at the individual level.

Self-assessments are usually among the first techniques implemented by organizations and individuals in their career development efforts (Gutteridge & Otte, 1983). A personal SWOT analysis involves a combination of a self-assessment tool and a strategic planning activity.

Typically, individuals completing self-assessment exercises for career-planning purposes go through a process where they think through their life roles, interests, skills, and work attitudes and preferences. Following such a situation analysis they then try to plan their short- and long-term goals, develop action plans to meet those goals, and identify any obstacles and opportunities that might be associated with them.

For an individual, this process means matching their strengths and weaknesses with occupational opportunities. In other words, the person wants to pursue occupational jobs, and a career that capitalize on his or her interests, aptitudes, values, and skills. He or she also wants to choose occupations, jobs, and a career that make sense in terms of projected future demand for various types of occupations. The consequences of a bad choice, or of no choice, are too severe to leave to others or luck. Luck, as someone once indicated, comes to those who are best prepared.

*Personal SWOT Self-Assessment*

 Figure 2 provides a convenient template for a personal SWOT analysis. Note that for each of the four areas (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) there are examples to start the self-evaluation. Of course, the SWOT analysis is performed in light of an individual’s personal mission statement (see Douglas, 1994; Rabow, Wrubel, & Remen, 2009) and his or her strategic vision of where they see themselves headed and what they hope to become in the future. The vision clarifies the long-term direction the individual would like to pursue. A discussion of these four areas is now presented.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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*Identify one’s strengths*

Here individuals should ask themselves which personal attributes will help them to achieve their objective, in other words, what are the things that set them apart from other job applicants? Strengths can be viewed as a resource that allows individuals to achieve their defined goals and should be carefully weighed in light of the current and expected work environment. Strengths identify what one does better than others in the workplace/school.

These strengths could include one’s work experience, academic background, specific technical competencies, personal characteristics (e.g., ability to work in a team, one’s communication skills, and the ability to work under deadline pressure), one’s business contacts, one’s language skills, etc. Here it is important to see oneself through the eyes of the prospective employer.

Once a person has identified these key attributes, they should figure out how they will help them to make a success of this specific position. The idea is then to sell these strengths during an interview. According to management guru, Peter Drucker (1995), the only way to discover one’s strengths is through feedback analysis. He suggests that whenever a person makes a key decision or takes a key action that they write down what they expect will happen. Nine to 12 months later, compare the actual results with one’s expectations. Practiced consistently, this simple method will show a person within a fairly short period of time where your strengths lie—and this is of utmost importance to know. The learning point here is for one to concentrate on their strengths. Drucker (2005) suggests, “Put yourself where your strengths can produce results” (p. 102).

*Identify one’s weaknesses*

Now individuals should ask themselves what they could improve and what they should avoid and what others are likely to see as weaknesses. They are limitations, faults, or defects in the person that impedes progress toward defined goals. Weaknesses are critical in that these are areas in need of improvement—those areas that should be addressed in training opportunities or future job positions where these skills are needed might be acquired or fine-tuned.

Weaknesses are matters that a person can control. Examples of weaknesses include lack of work experience, an inappropriate academic background, lack of technical skills, lack of interpersonal skills (e.g. lack of leadership skills or team-management skills), and negative personal characteristics (e.g. impatience, lack of empathy, or lack of discipline).

If a person finds it difficult to identify their weaknesses, it could help to go through their previous performance appraisals. A colleague that they trust and respect might also be able to help—even though this could be a painful exercise. Additionally, in assessing one’s weaknesses it may be important to keep in mind the Stockdale paradox. In his best-selling book, *Good to Great* (2001), Collins, noted that superior companies practice this mind-set. The Stockdale Paradox is named after admiral Jim Stockdale, who was the highest ranking military officer held captive for eight years during the Vietnam War. Interestingly, Admiral Stockdale indicated that it was always the most optimistic of his prison mates who failed to survive: “They were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart” (Collins, 2001, p. 84).

What these optimists failed to do was confront the reality of their situation. They preferred the ostrich approach, sticking their heads in the sand and hoping that the difficulties would just go away. That self-delusion might have made it easier on them in the short-term, but when they were eventually forced to face reality, it had become too much and they could not handle it. Stockdale, on the other hand, confronted the worst aspects of his current status along with an optimistic faith: “You will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties. AND at the same time… You must confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be” (Doherty, n. d.). The Stockdale Paradox suggests that individuals be ruthlessly honest in identifying their weaknesses yet maintain a faith that they can achieve their personal goals. Being candid about oneself was also emphasized in *Atlas Shrugged* (Rand, 1957): “Nobody stays here by faking reality in any matter whatever” (p. 794). Thus, individuals are advised to adopt an unyielding discipline to stop doing anything and everything that does not fit tightly with their development and craft a “not to do” list to address weaknesses.

Once a person has a picture of their weaknesses, they can start working on ways to improve on them. It may be too late for this specific interview, but enrolling for that computer or project-management course may be just what might be needed to get the next job they apply for.

The more challenging analysis of opportunities and threats requires an examination of major external forces that may impact the individual (e.g., the scientific, technological, marketing, cultural, and attitudinal trends). Some of these changes represent opportunities, and some of them represent real threats to the person.

A caveat, however, was noted by Drucker (2005) with respect to strengths and weakness. He suggested that individuals focus little effort on improving areas of low competence. “It takes far more energy and work to improve from incompetence to mediocrity than it takes to improve from first-rate performance to excellence. And yet most people-especially most teachers and most organizations concentrate on making incompetent performers into mediocre ones” (p. 102). Energy, resources, and time should go instead to making a competent person into a star performer; i.e., work on improving one’s strength’s.

In summary, the best answer seems to be to build competencies and rehabilitate weaknesses, as neither approach alone suffices. Indeed, McCall (2009) may have the final word: “Developing leaders with the breadth and experience to handle the complexity of organizations in today’s global world simply requires an investment in helping those with talent shed what no longer serves them (both strengths and weaknesses) and continually acquire the new skills that they need” (p. 54).

*Identify the external opportunities*

A key question to be addressed in this quadrant in Figure 2 is what opportunities exist in a person’s (projected) career field? Which external conditions are helpful in achieving one’s objective? Opportunities are the possibilities that an individual might take advantage of and pertains to forces in a person’s operating environment that might increase demand for what the person can provide or allows the individual to provide it more effectively. For example, reading about future likely trends in the industry might help to recognize which direction one might move in.

These are opportunities that an individual does not have any control over, but which can be to their advantage. A person may find that a certain career field is particularly in need of their set of skills, that few people are willing to work in the specific geographical area where they are applying for the job, that the country’s affirmative-action strategy counts in one’s favor, etc. Potential opportunities are evaluated in terms of how well they “fit” key concerns of the individual such as prejudices, preferences, lifestyle considerations, risk inclinations. This will involve “due diligence” on the part of the person.

It may be also helpful to attend to the following key trends (Snell & Bohlander, 2013):

* Economic factors and development information, including general, regional, and global condition;
* Industry and competitive trends including new processes, services, and innovations;
* Technological changes, including information technology, innovations, and automation;
* Government and legislative issues, including laws and regulatory changes and administrative rulings;
* Social concerns, including child care, elder care, the environment, and educational priorities; lifestyle modifications, and
* Demographic and labor market trends (e.g., labor shortages), including the age, composition, and literacy of the labor market, and immigration.

Individuals should start working on ways in which to exploit each opportunity. It might even be a good idea to discreetly point out these facts in a job interview.

*Identify the external threats*

External threats are conditions, barriers, or constraints that limit or those that are harmful to achieving a person’s goals or objective/s. These are things that a person doesn’t have any control over. However, if one is clever, they may be able to lessen their negative effects.

Examples of external threats include a market saturated with candidates who share a person’s set of skills and competencies, competitors with superior skills, experience, knowledge, competitors who went to schools with better reputations, affirmative-action strategies that count against a person, downsizing in one’s field due to obsolescence of the profession (e.g. factory workers that are replaced by machinery), etc. What has typically been found to be effective, based on SWOT input, is a strategy that takes advantage of the person’s opportunities by employing his or her strengths and by proactively addressing threats by correcting or compensating for weaknesses. It is important to recognize strengths can be viewed as weaknesses and opportunities can contain hidden threats as well. Therefore, it is helpful to ask questions such as: ‘How might this threat also be an opportunity?’ and ‘Does this opportunity contain threats as well?’ Also, ‘How might this strength turn out to be a weakness?’ Answers to such questions may give individuals new insights into choosing appropriate strategies and promote innovative ways of thinking about known issues in new ways (Thompson, 1993). Additionally, it is advised that individuals engage significant others in performing a SWOT analysis for themselves. It may be helpful for individuals to ask key people in their lives (e.g., spouse, partner, boss) to complete a SWOT analysis evaluating them.

Overall, the intent of SWOT is to capitalize on the strengths, address weaknesses, take full advantage of opportunities, and minimize the impact of threats. SWOT should therefore be used to identify issues that are considered key to the individual’s present and future performance (Hill & Westbrook, 1997). These critical issues must be clear and followed carefully through the planning, development and review of any program, plan, or decision (Koch, 2000; Thompson, 1993).

Discussion

A SWOT analysis is a strategic business tool that can be applied equally powerfully to individuals. In some ways, completing a personal SWOT review is to ask a person to treat their career as a business and themselves as a competitive product. This paper illustrates how a classical strategic management technique—SWOT analysis—can be adapted for individuals to help introduce change in their lives and to take critical personal decisions to enhance their career objectives. A SWOT analysis will be most helpful if it is used to support the vision, mission, and objectives a person has already defined. The SWOT will at least provide perspective, and at best will reveal connections and areas for action. Hollingworth (2002), for example, has encouraged individuals to undertake a SWOT analysis of themselves as managers and found that individuals developed an improved level of self-awareness and often real change in their attitude or behavior. SWOT is not the only self-assessment technique a person can use, but it is one with a long track record of effectiveness.

The comfort level of many workers and business students with using SWOT analyses in their firms often lowers their resistance to doing some interesting self-analysis and legitimized their decisions and new lifestyle and career choices. A personal SWOT analysis should be taken into consideration when creating a career development plan. The input from the SWOT analysis can be used to match one’s strengths with opportunities in the future workplace and to identify those areas where training and development are needed. This should be conducted on a regular basis to ensure that one’s portfolio of competencies is constantly being updated to meet the challenges of the changing business environment. Another excellent time to utilize a SWOT analysis is every time an individual applies or interviews for a new position. Going through this exercise can help a person be prepared for the interview and get them ready to answer tough questions from interviewers (e.g., “Describe your biggest weakness”). Following this process also allows one to anticipate areas that could be potential issues during the interview. Yet another time to initiate a SWOT analysis was suggested by Steve Jobs, in his *12 Rules of Success* (n. d.). He recommended that people perform a SWOT analysis when they join/start a company to take control of their own career development. Nevertheless, SWOT may have some drawbacks.

*Misuse of SWOT*

Yet for all its simplicity, SWOT can be used poorly. Hill and Westbrook (1997) and McDonald (1999) suggested that SWOT analyses often yielded only shallow extemporaneous data that are as likely to detract from critical issues, themes, and thrusts as illuminate them. Another problem cited is that SWOT is sometimes used to justify a previously decided course of action rather than used as a means to open up new possibilities (Koch, 2000). SWOT has also been criticized for giving the option for people or organizations to look for strengths that match opportunities yet ignore thoseopportunities that cannot be used to their advantage. A related drawback is that it might not encourage openness to new possibilities since SWOT usually overemphasizes one’s current position. Additionally, various investigations (Hill & Westbrook, 1997) showed that SWOT is often looked upon as a basic analytical structure only, or used as a way of launching a wide-ranging group discussion about a company’s strategic position and not linked to any subsequent strategic planning application. The failure to link outcomes of SWOT exercises to the rest of the planning system has been suggested as the primary misuse of the SWOT tool (Chermack & Kasshanna, 2007). This failure reducesSWOT analysis to a mere conversational tool—little more than a topic of discussion. In short, SWOT’s ease of use often leads to its misuse. Moreover, Mintzberg (1994), David (1997) and many others suggest that SWOT is the main cause of what is considered an excessive formalization of the strategy making process. Finally, while SWOT analysis is widely used in business and thus providing anecdotal evidence of its utility and success as a strategic management instrument, it has also been criticized for lacking a body of solid theory and research testifying to its effectiveness (Hill & Westbrook, 1997).

 Despite these shortcomings, workers who maintain their employability must make a habit of self-assessment and scanning their environments for information that may lead to occupational opportunities and avoid career-limiting threats. SWOT provides such an organizing framework that has remained relatively unchanged since its development over 40 years ago. Because the SWOT procedure is widely taught in business schools and practiced in numerous businesses as part of their strategic planning process, many individuals are familiar with this analysis which will facilitate its adoption by individuals in a career development context.

Of course, career planning should not stop with a SWOT analysis. It is important to develop actions for moving forward. A SWOT can be helpful in creating a plan to take action, keeping in mind the goals to be achieved or the desired end state to be reached. It should, therefore, be used to identify issues that are considered key to individuals’ present and future performance.

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Figure 1. The strategic management process adapted from Bateman and Snell (2004).



Figure 2. SWOT Analysis Pattern for Individuals.

