

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING IN EMPLOYMENT COUNSELING

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ABSTRACT

Many traits, states, and experiences widely accepted as leading to desirable consequences actually have costs that at high levels may begin to outweigh their benefits, creating inverted-U-shaped relationships in which performance, adaptation, and health are optimal at moderate levels but that often turn negative at high levels. By attending more carefully to this “too much of a good thing” principle, it is believed that employment counselors can develop a deeper, more effective understanding of the conditions that facilitate well-being and performance of their clients and that conventional wisdom in leadership development that focuses on developing strengths as opposed to overcoming flaws may be problematic. Consistent with ancient philosophical advice from both Eastern and Western traditions empirical studies are presented which support the view that moderation and balance are desirable and that too much of any good thing is dysfunctional.

INTRODUCTION

Employment counseling has been a core element of workforce development since the early 1960s. A service, focused on career development, job placement and other counseling services with the primary objective of improving workforce performance. Government and industry leaders, alike, have embraced the idea that employment counseling supports employee’s professional development and job satisfaction, which in aggregate, supports a strong competitive workforce.

There is a tendency to conclude that if a little is good then more must be better, but life is rarely linear and in some cases, what is good in small quantities often becomes harmful in larger doses (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Consider drinking wine. According to the American Heart Association, more than 60 prospective studies have suggested that moderate alcohol consumption—defined by the Department of Health and Human Services *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* as having no more than one drink per day for women and no more than two drinks per day for men—may decrease the risk of chronic heart disease (CHD), ischemic heart disease and stroke, and other causes of mortality. Research shows that moderate drinkers are at less of a risk for CHD and other causes of mortality than nondrinkers though heavy drinkers are at a much greater risk (Rudis, 2010). While a glass or two of red wine daily can be beneficial, no one recommends drinking a *bottle* of wine daily. This article will test the assumption that “more is better” when approaching employment counseling while exploring the need for a greater degree of balance in facilitating employee well-being and performance.

Underlying the vast majority of existing psychology, counseling, and management literatures is the often unacknowledged assumption that positive traits, experiences, and emotions have monotonic, linear effects with respect to adaptation and performance. But

research (e.g., Grant & Schwartz, 2011; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013; Quinlan, Janis, & Bales, 1982) suggests that there appears to be a robust curvilinear relationship associated with many positive phenomena such that moderate levels of many beneficial antecedents are optimal and that departures from these ranges are dysfunctional and maladaptive (see Figure 1). While Quinlan et al. (1982) advised counselors over 30 years ago to "... start thinking in terms of a family of inverted U-shaped curves to represent the interacting variables" (p. 184), this guidance appears to need revisiting (Miller, 2008). Accordingly, this paper attempts to address this need by briefly reviewing cultural traditions regarding the significance of moderation, examples of selected positive personal and organizational antecedents that have empirically illustrated nonmonotonic associations, and conclude with a call for balance and the importance of considering curvilinear relationships.

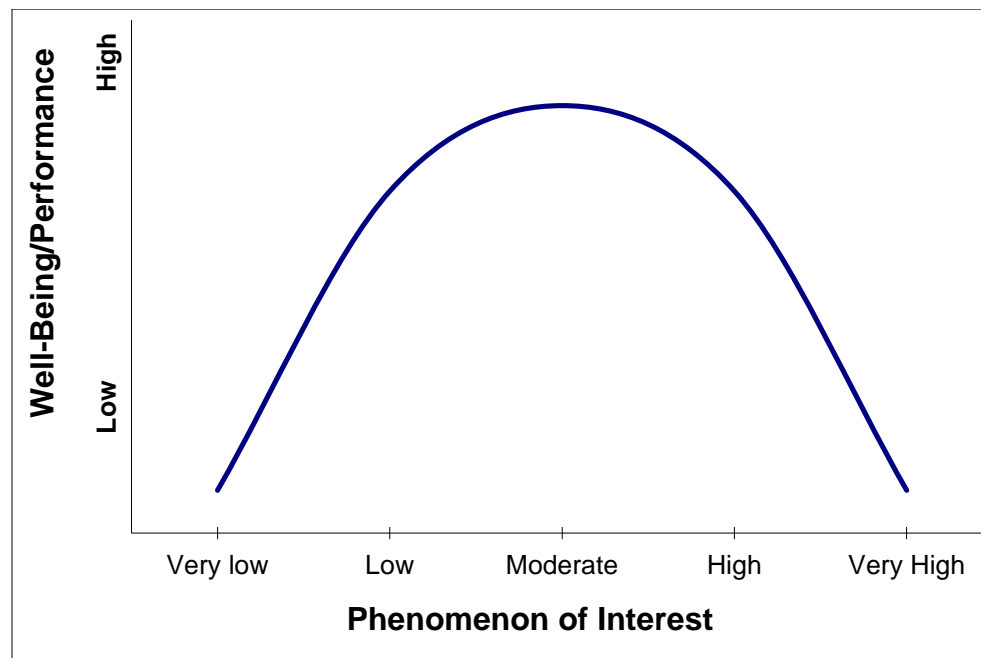


Figure 1: General curvilinear relationship between well-being/performance and many events.

CULTURAL ADVISEMENTS

Proverbs and aphorisms, such as the Chinese "too much can be worse than too little," the Buddha's Middle Way, and its Western counterpart "everything in moderation; nothing in excess," suggest that this principle is widely accepted across cultures. In fact, these and similar sayings in both Eastern and Western cultures trace back to philosophers whose teachings have been highly influential in their respective regions (e.g., Aristotle, Buddha, and Confucius; Phillips, 2004). Modern scholars have labeled this universal advocacy for proportionality over extremity the *doctrine of the mean* (Aristotle, 1999; Confucius, 2004; Urmson, 1973). For its proponents, pursuing the Golden Mean, the Middle Path, or moderation as it is also known, is a moral and practical imperative (Hamburger, 1959). Confucius indicated that "Perfect is the virtue

which is according to the Mean!” (2004, p. 2), the Buddha pointed out that moderation was the path to wisdom and enlightenment, and Aristotle said that happiness and success exist at the mean between the extremes of deficiency and excess (Nussbaum, 1995).

Building on the doctrine of the mean, counselors have good reason to believe that life is nonmonotonic. Suedfeld (1969) referred to this principle as the “ubiquitous U” finding that across many domains, one finds that X increases Y to a point, and then it decreases Y. Common examples include the Yerkes-Dodson law (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908) and classic theories of optimal arousal (Eysenck, 1967) where too little arousal bogs down task efficiency and too much derails. Despite the intuitive familiarity of the inverted U, counselors have failed to appreciate fully its prevalence and importance. Consequently, the purpose of this article is to draw attention to what may be a fundamental and ubiquitous principle: There is no such thing as an unmitigated good and that all positive traits, states, and experiences have costs that at high levels may begin to outweigh their benefits, creating the nonmonotonicity of an inverted U.

Although influential philosophers have highlighted and promoted this concept, the management and counseling literatures include relatively few discussions of the need for balance between deficiency and excess. Rather, management and counseling scholars and practitioners tend to focus on addressing the former, with less concern for the latter. Consequently, the assumption that “more is better” implicitly drives efforts to maximize desired outcomes. By attending more carefully to this principle, counselors can assist their clients and gain a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the conditions that facilitate well-being and performance.

To document the pervasiveness of the inverted U, evidence for curvilinear effects of a wide range of familiar phenomena on well-being and performance is reviewed. In doing so, we explore aspects of the human world that exhibit these inverted-U relationships and call attention to this often ignored phenomenon. In disparate domains researchers have increasingly discovered that at high levels, positive effects begin to turn negative.

SELECTED PHENOMENA EXHIBITING THE UBIQUITOUS INVERTED-U SHAPE RELATIONSHIP

In this section a review of research that identifies well-being and performance costs of high levels of various positive phenomena are presented. This is presented in two broad areas: one addresses more individually-focused characteristics and the second more organizationally-oriented issues.

Individual factors

Because employment counselors are generally more involved with individual-related concerns these issues are addressed in greater detail. These were selected because they are frequently addressed by counselors, and in part, because of the belief that such personal factors are often considered encouraging and where excessive levels may not have been intuitively considered to have a dark side.

Volunteering

In a departure from past research on the well-being benefits of volunteering, Windsor, Anstey, and Rodgers (2008) proposed that at very high levels, volunteering would decrease

psychological well-being through two mechanisms: increasing role overload and reducing time and energy available for other meaningful activities. Data from a sample of adults in their 60s revealed the predicted curvilinear pattern of time spent volunteering with psychological well-being. Although moderate levels of volunteering predicted higher positive affect, lower negative affect, and higher life satisfaction, high levels of volunteering were associated with lower positive affect, higher negative affect, and lower life satisfaction. The negative affect costs of high levels of volunteering were especially pronounced for participants without partners. Perhaps very high levels of volunteering reduce well-being by creating overload and limiting engagement in other meaningful activities. As the authors explained, “The highest well-being scores were evident among those who engaged in at least 100 hr of volunteer activity per year but fewer than 800 hr . . . engaging in high levels of volunteering can have adverse effects on well-being as a result of an increased burden of responsibility” (Windsor et al., 2008, pp. 67, 69).

Empathy

Another manifestation of a quadratic relationship involves empathy—the feeling of concern for others in need. Although empathy increases prosocial behavior (for a review see Batson, 1998), there is evidence that at very high levels empathy can be emotionally aversive and undermine prosocial behavior. Eisenberg (2000) summarized research on “empathic overarousal” (p. 674), in which a strong experience of empathy cultivates feelings of distress and noted may have the boomerang effect of distracting attention away from others and toward managing one’s own aversive feelings.

Research also suggests that empathy runs the risk of undermining task performance. High levels of empathy can cloud judgment, leading to self-sacrificing behaviors that benefit others at the expense of achieving one’s own goals (Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008) or sometimes even failing to benefit others. For example, Groopman (2007) chronicles his own failure to diagnose a life-threatening infection in a hospitalized cancer patient because his empathy for the patient’s discomfort in the face of grueling chemotherapy induced him not to ask the patient to roll over and be examined for bedsores.

Doctors, lawyers, counselors, and other professionals are constantly balancing the competing calls for empathy and detachment (e.g., Kronman, 1993). In addition, psychological and business research demonstrates that high empathy can encourage unethical behaviors that help the targets of empathy but violate principles of fairness and justice (Gino & Pierce, 2009).

Self-esteem, optimism, and self-efficacy

Over the past few decades, the need for high self-esteem, defined as global feelings of self-liking, self-worth, respect, and acceptance (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965) has risen from an individual to a societal concern. “North American society in particular has come to embrace the idea that high self-esteem is not only desirable in its own right, but also the central psychological source from which all manner of positive behaviors and outcomes spring” (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003, p. 3). This belief has led to efforts to raise individual’s self-esteem and such programs seem to have been effective in raising self-esteem scores, on average, on self-esteem measures over the last several decades (Twenge & Campbell, 2001).

However, in the rush to enhance self-worth, U.S. culture may have opened the door to something darker and more sinister—narcissism which is defined as a positive and inflated view

of oneself, a view associated with materialism, a sense of entitlement, a lack of empathy, aggression, and relationship problems (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Narcissists are not just confident, they're overconfident. At its core, narcissism is the fantasy that a person is better than he or she actually is and certainly superior to others. In trying to build a society that celebrates high self-esteem, self-admiration, self-adulation, and "loving yourself," Americans have inadvertently created more narcissists with their associated problematic behaviors and attitudes.

Related to self-esteem are the concepts of optimism and self-efficacy. Brown and Marshall (2001) demonstrated inverted-U-shaped relationships between optimism and performance. At moderate levels, optimism provides confidence and increases planning, but very high optimism leads to inadequate preparation and the underestimation of risks. As Haaga and Stewart (1992) explained, optimism can "be too extreme, leading to inappropriate complacency about the adequacy of one's skills for coping with difficult situations" (p. 27). Likewise, Baumeister (1989) found that exaggerations in the positivity of self-perceptions (referred to as positive illusions) can be helpful when they are slight to moderate and harmful when they are substantial and exaggerated. Moreover, research shows that high levels of self-efficacy create overconfidence, which can result in less time and energy spent on learning and planning (Vancouver & Kendall, 2006). Coming from another perspective Bandura and Locke (2003) indicated that "In preparing for challenging endeavors, some self-doubt about one's performance efficacy provides incentives to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to master the challenges" (p. 96).

Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness refers to the extent to which persons are dependable, persistent, organized, and goal directed (Barrick & Mount, 2005). Past personality research has consistently found that conscientiousness is positively related to job performance and that this relationship is generalizable across settings and types of jobs (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Compared to those who are low in conscientiousness, highly conscientious persons tend to be more motivated to perform well on the job (Judge & Ilies, 2004) and therefore are likely to achieve better performance through careful planning, goal setting, and persistence (Barrick & Mount, 1991). However, after a point, high conscientiousness may no longer be helpful to task performance because excessive levels often result in paying too much attention to marginal detail, overlooking bigger goals, and creating inflexibility which might actually interfere with ongoing professional development.

Such persons often pay too much attention to marginally important issues and overlook more important aims required on the job (Mount, Oh, & Burns, 2008). Highly conscientious people are likely to be more prone to self-deception and rigidity, which may inhibit learning new skills and knowledge, leading to lower performance (LePine, Colquitt, & Erez, 2000). Moscoso and Salgado (2004) argued that extreme levels of conscientiousness may not be beneficial to job performance, "because the maladaptive tendencies of conscientiousness (compulsive style) produce an interference with the practices considered as signs of a good quality job" (p. 360). As such, although the relationship between conscientiousness and task performance is positive at lower levels of conscientiousness it may become weaker and eventually disappear at higher levels of the construct. Indeed, Le et al. (2011) found that conscientiousness has an inverted-U-shaped relationship with job performance, especially in simple jobs, presumably because extremely high conscientiousness involves perfectionism and an excessive focus on details at the

expense of the bigger picture. High levels of conscientiousness will initially lead to better performance but the relationship will become weaker and then eventually disappear after it reaches a certain point.

Choice

It is a common belief in modern U.S. society that more choices are desirable—that the human ability to manage, and the human desire for, choice is infinite. Economic models of choice and common sense suggest that having more alternatives is preferable because it increases the chance of finding one's most preferred option. Decades of research suggest that choice increases satisfaction (e.g., Langer & Rodin, 1976) and larger assortments increase the likelihood that consumers will find an option that matches their preferences (Lancaster 1990). However, recent research has highlighted downsides of “too many choices.” Excessive possibilities may result in choice overload and can result in people questioning the decisions they make before they even make them, setting up individuals for unrealistically high expectations which can make them blame themselves for any and all failures. In the long run, this can lead to anxiety and perpetual stress.

College students, for example, were more likely to write an extra-credit essay and wrote better essays when they had 6 topics from which to choose than when they had 30 options (Iyengar & Lepper 2000). This stream of research demonstrates that a large number of options may be paralyzing rather than liberating, and that choice in excessive levels can be debilitating.

Organizational factors

A number of organizational factors have been found to be problematic at high levels. For example, too much organizational identification (Dukerich, Kramer, & Parks, 1998), organizational citizenship behavior (Bergeron, 2007), morale (Hirt, Levine, McDonald, Melton, & Martin, 1997), positive affect (Lam, Spreitzer, & Fritz, 2014), and trust and autonomy (Langfred, 2004) can diminish performance. Recent metaanalytic evidence suggests that moderate levels of positive emotions enhance creativity, but high levels do not (Davis, 2008). In the field of entrepreneurship, high levels of prerequisite entrepreneurial traits such as self-efficacy (Zhao, Seibert, & Hills, 2005), creativity, and passion (Cardon, Wincent, Singh, & Drnovsek, 2009) can all lead to unwelcomed consequences not only for the entrepreneurs themselves but also for their ventures (Audia, Locke, & Smith, 2000; Cardon et al., 2009).

Finally, in the field of strategic management, there is evidence that adherence to highly recommended strategies, such as vertical integration and outsourcing (Rothaermel, Hitt, & Jobe, 2006), can lead to detrimental outcomes when taken too far. Studies have also demonstrated that investing in research and development (Jones & Williams, 2000) and, relatedly, offering more (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000) and more differentiated products (Thompson, Hamilton, & Rust, 2005) can lead to diminishing financial returns.

It appears, then, that across many domains one finds that X increases Y to a point, and then it decreases Y which Pierce and Aguinis (2013) call the “too-much-of-a-good-thing effect” (p. 313) and Grant and Schwartz (2011) refer to as the nonmonotonic effects of strengths and virtues. Similarly, Schwartz and Sharpe (2006) argued that “too much of a virtue can be as big an

enemy of eudemonia as too little” (p. 383) and that too much of a good thing can be problematic and that more is not necessarily better.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary numerous domains researchers have increasingly discovered that at high levels, positive effects begin to turn negative. More specifically, the ubiquitous inverted-U finding suggests that in working with clients it may not be as beneficial to address their strengths as opposed to their weaknesses. Yet, this is what two renowned scholars suggest. Seligman (2002) proposed that to enhance well-being and effectiveness, people should begin by identifying their signature strengths and then seek to develop them. Likewise, management and business guru, Peter Drucker, recommends a focus on strengths: “First and foremost, concentrate on your strengths. Put yourself where your strengths can produce results. ...It takes far more energy to improve from incompetence to mediocrity than to improve from first-rate performance to excellence” (Drucker, 2005, p. 102). No matter how hard a person works on certain weaknesses, the logic goes, chances are they will make only marginal progress. Such strength-based approaches assume that “the more developed any strength is, the better people are” (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006, p. 380).

Such a belief, however, may be naïve at best and wrong at worst (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003, 2009). Moving from first-rate performance to excellence looks a lot like moving from moderate to extreme in Figure 1 with its accompanying toxic effects at high levels. As suggested above, this paper argues that when carried to extremes many positive phenomena, including one’s strengths, have a downside at excessive levels. Managers get themselves into trouble by overdoing it—doing too much of a good thing, whether that might be planning too much, pushing too hard, delegating too much authority, getting too caught up in the details, and so on. That is how strengths become weaknesses.

A takeaway from this paper may be that moderation, like the ancients indicated, may be best and that counselors should be leery of extremes and should be aware that often there is too much of a good thing. Another action point to remember is that balance is important and balances must often be struck, depending on the situation. Good managers ensure balanced work environments and guard against lopsidedness. For example, some executives drive hard for results but neglect the people side; some managers are excellent planners but poor at implementing plans; and some supervisors are valued for their creativity, out-of-the-box thinking, and chartering new areas, but break all the rules, compromise values, and avoid collaboration. Balance backfires, however, when it moves from being bold, or tough, versus about bland compromise. If a leader in striving for balance is mediocre at everything (or engenders mediocrity in his or her employees), then balance has backfired.

Nevertheless, balance can be valuable and avoiding extremes and embracing moderation is often wise. Similarly, considering both sides of an argument before acting serves us well. The Founding Fathers separated powers in the American government, creating a system of checks and balances that would prevent anyone individual or group from seizing all control. Balance is particularly helpful at times of transition, when first-time managers seek to complement their technical skills with softer leadership skills. When an accountant makes partner, she may need to balance her accounting skills with the ability to win business and lead teams.

Finally, the importance of balance and moderation can also be seen in McCall and Hollenbeck’s (2002) description of managerial failures in seemingly paradoxical terms:

This one derailed because of 'insufferable arrogance,' but that one derailed for being too humble. ... This one was so mired in detail as to miss the possibilities, while that one was too visionary to get anything done. One was an imperious autocrat; the other delegated too much. One was overly analytical, but the next one was unfocused and not analytical enough. [One] Didn't keep promises; [but] this one didn't let go of promises that didn't work out. [One] Couldn't achieve consensus, [while another] ... achieved consensus by surrounding himself with yes-men (p. 163).

Thus, it may well serve employment counselors to remember curvilinear relationships and that optimal psychological functioning and well-being tends to be associated with moderate degrees of many variables and that departures from this middle ground are associated with difficulties and risks.

"Manpower is the basic resource. It is the indispensable means of converting other resources to mankind's use and benefit. How well we develop and employ human skills is fundamental in deciding how much we will accomplish as a nation."

-Manpower Report to Congress, John F. Kennedy, 1963

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