Attributes of Vocational Excellence

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Abstract

“Excellence” and “vocational excellence” are buzzwords today, discussed in the literature with various connotations. Individuals want and try to perform their best, but not all succeed. How do some individuals succeed and become exemplary? What makes them the excellent performers? These questions always hound us. This review-based chapter sheds light on excellence and vocational excellence. Grounded on competence, self-regulation, and expertise theories, the chapter begins with defining the term “excellence.” The major portion of the chapter is spent on explaining attributes of vocational excellence. To name a few, individuals with vocational excellence are self-motivated people with high technical as well as soft skills. Ability to network with professionals, to solve problems, to communicate effectively with others, to work successfully as part of a team, and to remain calm and focused on the work are some of the attributes of vocational excellence. The chapter ends with presenting benefits of vocational excellence and ways that educational institutions can contribute to attainment of vocational excellence.

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Introduction

The world is evolving fast. Challenges, risks, and problems are emerging that are making human life more difficult in some ways even as new technologies and innovations are being invented to make life easier in other ways. As human beings, we strive to examine challenges, risks, and problems that we come across, find ways to move forward and continue developing, and live prosperous and happy lives. To make this happen, we use our knowledge and skills and try to perform our best. But not all of us succeed. This leads us to these questions: What factors govern the best performance? Why are some people able to give their best while others cannot? These questions can be answered through the terms “excellence” and “vocational excellence,” which is the focus of this chapter.

Many examples in the literature discuss excellence and vocational excellence (Attwood 1984; Imel 1984; James 2016; Miller 1984; Levesque et al. 1995; Nokelainen et al. 2012; SKOPE 2016; Tyson 2015). Yet, they differ on the definitions and explanations of these terms. Some authors present excellence as being similar to competence; others argue that excellence is a step further and at a higher level than competence.

The literature presents differing perspectives on how and when the term “excellence” originated and gained wide recognition, while some (Lewis 2009; Tyson 2015) suggest that “excellence” came into the limelight with Greek philosopher Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* 1975, wherein he discusses that humans always strive to achieve good and, more importantly, the highest good. Knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes help them acquire pleasure, wealth, honor and virtues, and then happiness – the highest good. The happiest stage – when nothing is lacking – is the state of excellence. This is possible when intellectual virtue, discipline of the mind acquired through education and training, and moral virtue, discipline of action acquired through habituated moral action, are attained. Lewis (2009) noted that the inspiration of the concept of excellence came from Chinese culture. Zhuge Liang (181–234) led a war using excellent strategies and the finest weaponries, which made the Chinese army win the wars they fought under Zhuge’s leadership, therefore achieving the state of excellence. According to Lewis (2009), Zhuge was popular not only as a war hero but also for his moral character – treating people with respect. It is, therefore, argued that human excellence and good citizenship (social responsibility) go together and are integral to each other.

What Is Vocational Excellence?

Changing human lifestyles, advancing technologies, and public anticipation of innovative, advanced, and efficient services press service providers to offer services more efficiently and their employees to have increasingly higher levels of
competence. Interest and enthusiasm to learn about and attain excellence in their respective fields among beneficiaries, service providers, students, and faculty are ever high. Given that service seekers as well as service providers are demanding quality services that are simple and that provide immediate relief, as emphasized by vocational education, this section discusses what excellence is in relation to vocational jobs and delineates various attributes of vocational excellence.

An individual with vocational excellence (VE) gives the best services – as expected or beyond what service seekers expect. According to Smeaton, Hughes, and Graeme (2002), vocational excellence is performing at the maximum expected and/or anticipated level and giving the highest level of satisfaction to the individuals involved. This prompts us to these questions: What are the attributes of vocational excellence? How do we know one has vocational excellence? What makes one so special and outstanding that he/she is able to demonstrate his/her vocational excellence? How does one attain vocational excellence?

Drawing from various items in the literature (Attwood 1984; Miller 1984; Klotz et al. 2014; Nokelainen et al. 2012; Smeaton et al. 2002; Smith and Rahimi 2011) and reflecting on our experiences of working in academia and elsewhere, we present the following attributes of vocational excellence. Conceptually the chapter builds on three complementary lines of thought – competence (Mulder 2014), self-regulation (Zimmerman 2002), and expertise through practice and social engagement (Lave and Wenger 1991; Smith and Rahimi 2011). Competence is the stage of having acquired cognitive, psychomotor, and affective learning. It is assumed that individuals with VE have all the attributes that competent individuals have. Having knowledge about the tasks, having skills to transform that knowledge into action, and having motivation to apply those skills in real life situations make individuals competent. Individuals with higher levels of competency perform better and contribute to enhance their organizational performance. On a similar note, as posited by Zimmerman (2002), individuals with vocational excellence should also be mentally strong and be able to self-regulate themselves to perform and stand out as demanded by the context. Finally, they value participative practice and social engagement (Lave and Wenger 1991; Smith and Rahimi 2011; Wenger 1998). They believe that their services are not limited to their own benefits and satisfaction but have benefits for their communities. They anticipate learning much from their communities and their activities. They feel themselves to be integral parts of the community. Qualities that build these constructs or foundations are what VE individuals uphold.

Technical skills: Vocational education should prepare individuals with necessary technical skills. Also referred to as “hard skills,” technical skills are specific skills that an individual possesses that helps him/her perform certain tasks or jobs. Technical skills are prerequisite for any individuals in their pursuit to attain vocational excellence, but technical skills are not all that they need. Technical skill:
Technical skills could be in various fields and/or professions (e.g., medicine, agriculture, business, computer science, environmental science, etc.) and at different levels of competency as outlined in National Institutes of Health (n.d.): fundamental awareness, basic knowledge; novice, limited experience; intermediate, practical application; advanced, applied theory; and expert, recognized authority or specialist, depending on the training, education, and experiences the individuals have.

The literature (Teaching.org 2012) has outlined many attributes that define technical skills of people with vocational excellence. Individuals with vocational excellence are able to run the tools and have thorough understanding of how those tools work, what problems they might see in those, and how to resolve those problems, as well as safety measures to follow while running the tools, to name a few. Innovativeness and motivation to learn and develop new technologies are other important attributes of individuals with sound technical skills.

There is a general consensus among scholars that technical skills are acquired through education and experience. A prevalent misconception among some practitioners, mainly in developing countries, is that technical skill is everything that is required to attain vocational excellence. This is not true.

**Soft skills**: Vocational excellence requires excellence in both technical and soft skills. Smeaton et al. (2002) argue that vocational excellence depends not only on high technical skills but also on individuals’ ability to articulate what they are doing and interpret or explain new things and difficulties to their clients and peers. Smeaton et al. (2002), Rampersad (2001), and Nokelainen et al. (2012) identified various attributes of vocational excellence that are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Identifying needs and problems facing communities or organizations, prioritizing them, and deciding when, what, and how to address them are essential attributes of vocational excellence. Vocational training institutions seek individuals to diagnose the problems and issues facing communities and proactively work to solve those issues.

Ability to work in a team is another attribute of individuals with vocational excellence. As and when needed, individuals should be able to bring in other workers and work as a team to attain the goal. The literature does not discuss much about how teamwork can be strengthened. We believe that involving members in planning and decision-making, communicating with and respecting others, and evaluating and reflecting on their work strengthen teamwork.

Individuals with vocational excellence are adaptive and flexible. They can quickly adapt to new situations as they arise. They act and proceed calmly when under pressure. They are apt at making adjustments to the work in progress and when work conditions and circumstances are changing.

Anderson et al. (2013) explain Bloom’s learning hierarchy model and argue that individuals with vocational excellence are able to recall, comprehend, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information and knowledge. Vocational education helps individuals articulate and apply learning as they move from one workplace or working community to another. It is not only them learning and being knowledgeable and intelligent but also helping their clients learn and succeed in the
transfer of the skills and knowledge to solve problems. For effective transfer of learning to happen, individuals with vocational excellence should be good communicators.

Literature underscores the importance of communication in vocational excellence. Individuals with VE have to constantly communicate with their peers and others in their organization and in their communities. Thus, we strongly believe that communication skills are one of the most important attributes they should possess. They require interpersonal skills, listening, writing, and speaking skills.

Gainful employment is one of the key goals of vocational education. It is therefore important to know what employers are looking for in employees vis-à-vis what employees should possess to be exemplary workers that employers would appreciate. Presenting the results of a survey conducted among employers, Smeaton et al. (2002) argued that employees should possess excellent reasoning skills, have the ability to schedule work and diagnose work problems, have work-process management skills, and be able to visualize output and plan the work accordingly. In summary, employees should be farsighted individuals with potential to become managers at their respective institutions.

Individuals with vocational excellence accept the challenges and risks that come along their paths as learning opportunities. They are able to manage those challenges and risks as they keep their mission going and thus become stronger and more confident in their endeavors. On a similar note, they do not give up even in difficult situations. They keep working on their endeavors, thus demonstrating resiliency and ability to work under pressure. Getting back to finishing unfinished tasks is an important quality they possess.

Reaching out and networking with other professionals and professional organizations; sharing innovations, information, knowledge, and skills; and learning from such networks are inevitable parts of attaining vocational excellence.

Being resourceful is yet another attribute of VE. This is possible because they have a rich body of knowledge and skills. Having been able to network with a large number of other professionals and organizations, they have a vast store of information that they can utilize to make informed decisions. Additionally, because they are credible and trustworthy, they are able to pull resources from many sources and utilize them wherever and whenever resources are needed the most.

People with vocational excellence possess Total Quality Management (TQM) attributes. They are lifelong learners – i.e., learning continuously and striving toward excellence. Knowledge ages rapidly, and it needs to be updated by further learning (Rampersad 2001). Individuals with vocational excellence strive to learn, establish collaborative relationships with industries, and eagerly share successful experiences and skills with others. They develop skills as experts through networking with colleagues from other teams, observing other people perform at their best, keeping up-to-date with developments in their professions, and exploring new possibilities in their careers.

Individuals with vocational excellence strive to learn from their own actions and also from the people around them. They learn from their teachers, fellow workers, and experiences at their workplaces. Individuals also have the zeal to learn from
people in their communities as they work together. As Nokelainen et al. (2012) describe, in essence the attributes, attitudes, and values of individuals and their interactions with others and with their environments underpin the development of vocational excellence.

Vocational excellence is not only for learning to know and learning to do but also for learning to be. Individuals who embrace higher levels of learning and make learning their way of life realize that they are the experts and should be exemplary to the organizations or communities they belong to. They also possess occupational knowledge and skills, attain occupational advancement, and hold aspirations, attitudes and values, feelings of success, and citizenship.

Individuals with vocational excellence demonstrate social responsibility; they learn and work not only for themselves but also for others – for example, for their communities. Such individuals are highly respected in their societies.

They value time and strive to accomplish tasks on time. They understand that time is precious and limited. Striving to achieve in career, knowledge, skills, recognition, etc., is paramount to them. They are strongly dedicated to their professions. They are committed to pursue and finish the tasks they are assigned. They are proud of their own work and the work of others in their organizations.

They are self-initiators and are able to work and succeed on their own initiative. They are eager to compete when opportunity arises because they possess a competitive spirit. They are enthusiastic about their work, enthusiastic to learn new things, and enthusiastic to fix problems. With a well-thought-out plan, they are clear about what they are doing, what their objectives and goals are, and how to attain those objectives and goals. They follow the trajectories they have envisioned. They prepare and organize things well; therefore, they know the bits and pieces of the things they are involved in. People observing them and their actions and behaviors clearly understand their message: they are fully aware of what they are working for, what their clients or peers are expecting from them, and what they should do to promote excellence and achievement in others.

In all these actions, they evaluate their work and evaluate themselves – their mental preparedness and/or motivation to their work. They critically evaluate each of their actions and their works/projects and correct them as needed. They learn from their actions and experiences. For example, they accept the criticisms of other people, they carefully examine those criticisms, and they learn from them and improve their actions as needed.

Vocational excellence promotes professionalism. The Merriam-Webster (2018) dictionary defines professionalism as “the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person”; and it defines a profession as “a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation.” Individuals with VE highly value their professions, adhere to professional ethics, and contribute to strengthen their professions. They live up to the standards expected by their profession and become inspirations for their peers.

In summary, individuals with vocational excellence strive to attain mastery by learning things as deeply as possible, and they possess high levels of technical and social skills and continually reflect on their entrepreneurial abilities.
Benefits of Vocational Excellence

Benefits of vocational excellence are many, technical, social, and economic, and of benefit to individuals, communities, and industries, locally and nationally (Mayhew et al. 2013a, b; Chankseliani and Mayhew 2015). Individuals with vocational excellence have gone through the learning hierarchical ladder – cognitive, psychomotor, and affective. This means that they are not only aware about or possess knowledge on their respective subjects, but they also have skills to apply that knowledge and are motivated to put those skills into action. They obviously have gone through higher levels of technical training and have attained a high level of technical ability that enables them to observe, assess their situations, diagnose problems, and make appropriate decisions to address those problems. Further, vocational excellence also bolsters individuals’ creativity.

Additional benefits of VE as outlined by Mayhew et al. (2013a, b) and Chankseliani and Mayhew (2015) include motivation to strive for a higher standard in their endeavors or work, for which they diligently pursue refinement of existing techniques.

Communication and interpersonal skills are essential for people to achieve vocational excellence. Additionally, communities today are getting more diverse than ever; thus cross-cultural understanding is paramount. Individuals with vocational excellence possess these qualities – communication skills and ability to work with diverse teams – and so impart lasting impact on their organizations.

Performing their work with confidence and working independently with others’ assistance are other benefits at the individual level. When individuals are at the height of their knowledge and skills, they can make judgments about what, how, why, when, and where to act, whom to seek help from, and to whom to provide support. They are able to lead the tasks that are in their hands because they are confident in their work and their ability to deal with others – their clients, their counterparts, and their organizations.

Doing the right things on time with the right approach is what successful individuals do. In the same vein, individuals with vocational excellence efficiently manage their time. As the above discussion alludes, the trajectory of achieving vocational excellence is complex and passes through cognitive, psychomotor, and affective phases. While one goes through these phases, he/she gets involved in many types of activities that serve as the platform for actors to plan, act, reflect, and synthesize their learning experiences. As a result, the activities in the succeeding cycle are more refined and advanced than those in the preceding ones. This is an example of improvement through practice.

It is worthy to note that individuals who are committed to experiential learning and who strive to attain excellence also pursue self-regulated learning. As noted by Wolters (2003), “... self-regulated learners are autonomous, reflective and efficient learners, and have the cognitive and metacognitive abilities as well as the motivational beliefs and attitudes needed to understand, monitor and direct their own learning” (p. 189). Wolters adds that self-regulated learners believe that efforts lead to success. Perseverance pays off.
Vocational excellence scholars are career-focused. They strategically examine and foresee job trends (Teaching.org 2012) and pursue studies in subjects that industries are looking for in their employees. Also, they can independently establish and maintain extensive networks with professionals, peers, and customers. They strive for career progression such as pay raises, promotion, and advancement to managerial positions. Because they have all the skills that are required to start new ventures and/or businesses, many of them can be self-employed if they want.

Businesses and industries strive to offer new, efficient, and quality services to their customers at affordable rates so that as many customers receive their services as possible. To make this happen, however, they need a sound plan, efficient machines, and skilled employees who can run those machineries. Industries and employers greatly benefit from employees with vocational excellence because these employees can offer new services or products, and they master new technologies for the companies that hire them. Eventually, vocational excellence does not only improve employee performance but provides employers higher return on investment together with positive publicity and increased prestige.

**Educational Institutions’ Roles to Attain Vocational Excellence**

Educational institutions such as colleges, universities, and vocational and technical schools play critical roles to impart to students theoretical as well as applied knowledge and skills and to motivate students to apply their skills in their respective professions. Tinto (1987) stressed that students come from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, and vocational and technical schools environments may be entirely new to them. Welcoming new students and guiding students to integrate themselves within the college culture through inception workshops, extracurricular and curricular activities, internships, informal student interactions, and faculty-student interactions are paramount.

It is essential to start orienting students about VE right from the very beginning so that they envision and plan high and they uphold high expectations and motivations. Schools should expose students to high standards and goals and motivate and prepare them to long for and strive to attain those standards and goals (Magisos et al. 1984; Nielsen 2010; Smeaton et al. 2002). Attaining excellence requires well-developed foundation skills in the subject areas he/she will pursue in his/her careers.

Competitiveness leading to excellence is a skill that requires preparation and practice. Opportunities to compete motivate students to work hard to improve their level of skills and thus achievement. So, schools are encouraged to hold competitions among students and inform participating students how they perform compared to the given standards.

Academic advising is an integral component of vocational education. According to Astin (1984), students’ proficiencies, academic or otherwise, depend on availability of faculty advisors, mentors, student affairs professionals, and resources and how they facilitate students to get involved in college activities. Students should
have opportunities to interact with faculty members and other school staff members. Faculty and staff advising will greatly help students find not only the right courses that suit their interest and backgrounds but also the resources that are available within the schools and, ultimately, to create proper learning environments. Suvedi et al. (2015) underscore the need to strengthen advising services for college students. The academic advisors need to organize themselves and frequently interact with their advisees.

How teachers teach and behave with students greatly influences student learning. Teachers are therefore advised to be extremely skillful in communicating with students. A University of Colorado (1988) report provides teachers and advisors with these tips: choose the right communication methods, adhere to timelines, dress well, use the right words with appropriate level of emphasis, use humor, prepare before class, use innovative learning tools, give concrete and real-life examples to elaborate on points, involve classes in role play, encourage all students to participate in class, and seek students’ feedback about facilitation.

Gopinathan and Lee (2018) describe the features of a good school that help attain excellence. These features include knowing the needs and interests of students, ensuring all students acquire fundamentals of literacy and numeracy, creating a positive learning environment, having caring and competent teachers, securing parental and community support, and providing opportunities to all students, regardless of family circumstances.

To serve students with high quality educational services, instructional staff members should be current with information, knowledge (expert), and skills. Their presentations should be appealing and motivating to students. Schools should be prepared to train advisors as needed. Instructors should also be motivated to teach their students, to understand their students’ learning needs and employer demands, and to offer the best learning experience to their students that they can.

Curricula guide teaching and learning in schools and colleges. Schools should regularly evaluate their curricula, soliciting input from experts, past graduates, students, and employers, and update and redesign the courses as needed (Magisos et al. 1984; Nielsen 2010; Smeaton et al. 2002). The world is dynamic. Communities, industries, consumers, and producers, to name a few, all are changing, and their needs and demands are changing, too. Colleges and schools should be mindful of these changes and update and revise their educational programs so that their graduates are comfortable and productive in the changed contexts. Those schools and graduates who can anticipate the future and prepare themselves for the future will stand out and will attain excellence.

Much has been discussed about students, teachers, and advisors as they relate to vocational excellence. But, there has been limited discussion about roles of support staff, parents and family members, communities, and organizations to help students attain, use, and sustain vocational excellence. We believe that support staff are critical to students’ learning and they should be proactive to cater to student needs and be accessible as needed.

Parents and family members make significant contributions to student learning. To build strong trust and rapport between student families and schools, it is highly
recommended that schools survey student families at the beginning of the enrollment and use survey input to plan for educational excellence, and, ultimately, students, their families, and schools together celebrate the excellence. Parents and family members should also render moral support to help students learn and grow intellectually and otherwise.

Communities should also offer necessary support – providing platforms to showcase talents, acknowledging talents and contributions, and marketing the talents, among others. It is the community where excellence is recognized, supported, and sustained.

**Conclusion**

Discourse on vocational education and training has been going on for a long time. A body of literature exists on this topic, but literature on vocational excellence has been sparse and scattered. A document discussing attributes of vocational excellence has been long overdue, a gap which this chapter has tried to fill.

Individuals need to attain high levels of vocational excellence to meet changing societal needs. As outlined earlier, vocational excellence is grounded on three pillars: competence, self-regulation, and social engagement. And it requires individual, family, and community efforts; vocational excellence results from the synergistic effect of these entities. The discussions point out that individuals desiring to achieve vocational excellence should strive for high levels of motivation, competence, and resilience. These professionals are resourceful, and they are valuable capital or assets in themselves.

The discussion illustrates that educational institutions, families, and societies have great influence on how individuals attain and sustain vocational excellence. We emphasize that all these entities – i.e., families, communities, and educational institutions, in particular – have to be proactive and competent in themselves to assist students in acquiring vocational excellence. The educational intuitions and their staffs should understand the meaning and gravity of vocational excellence. Evaluating educational programs, including advising and revising curricula, using cutting-edge technologies, providing opportunities for hands-on learning, exposing students to problem-based learning, organizing competitions among students, and recognizing students for their achievement are among the ways that educational institutions can promote the development of vocational excellence.

That process begins with educational and vocational training institutions following a six-step procedure: selecting the students, developing and revising curricula and instruction methods, providing qualified teachers, providing a conducive learning environment, managing the programs well, and continually evaluating and updating programs.

Because technical skills are prerequisites to attain vocational excellence and individuals acquire technical skills through education and training, educational institutions need to tailor their training programs to the needs of and make them accessible to members of disadvantaged groups who otherwise might not be able to afford or access them.
Teachers play crucial roles in students’ pursuit of educational excellence. To prepare teachers for teaching vocational excellence, institutions can bring teachers together with scientists and/or engineers from industry or government so that they can hear about cutting-edge research and development, ask questions, and network with other professionals.

Just as students should be evaluated for what and how they are learning, educational institutions need to continually evaluate their instructional programs, their professional development levels, teacher qualifications, and program management, among others (Maryland State Department of Education 2015).

We strongly feel that training to achieve vocational excellence should go beyond schools and colleges and reach people in all walks of life – employers, industries, consumers, politicians, to name a few. We believe that nonformal lifelong education would greatly contribute to making the world and the people living in it more prosperous and happy, as Aristotle envisioned.

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