
Positive career development at work: Trends and issues from a UK perspective

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This session examines the practical prospects for more positive and effective career development for employees, based on the experiences of major employers in the UK. It concentrates on:

- *Why* employers should embrace career development more wholeheartedly
- *How* to integrate career development better into HR strategies and practices
- *Who* is best placed to provide career support in the workplace
- *The deeper challenges* in managing and supporting careers in organisations

Why should employers embrace career development more wholeheartedly?

There has been much talk of ‘making the business case for career guidance’ in the UK. In the context of major employing organisations, we need to step back a pace or two and reflect on the business case for careers and career development in relation to employed adults before we start arguing the case for career guidance in the workplace.

The term ‘career’ in the context of the workplace is simplest seen as the sequence of work experiences an employee may have over time. Work experiences may involve moving from one job to another, but also the changing nature of work within a single job and experiences of projects. Career moves in organisations are very often sideways rather than upwards, and may cross departmental, geographical or functional boundaries.

‘Career’ holds out both opportunities and threats to an employing organisation. Among its threatening elements are its focus on the future (a very scary topic); the possibility of raising employee expectations which the organisation may not be able to satisfy; and the particular fear that discussing career issues may make employees wish to leave their current job or even leave for another employer.

On the positive side, career development holds out the possibility of growing critical skills within the organisation, which are often not available on the external labour market; of improved deployment of people in jobs where their talents are well used;

of an improved ability to attract good people and possibly retain them; and of improved flexibility in the workforce and therefore the ability to respond to business change. Most interesting perhaps is the link between positive career development and workforce motivation. The evidence for this is steadily growing in the large body of research on the link between HR practices and high performing organisations.¹ It seems that by attending to employees as people, the nature of the employment relationship shifts to one of higher engagement and higher performance.

‘Talent management’ is high on the agenda of large organisations and tends to focus on very senior people and those with the potential for such roles. Career development is embraced more enthusiastically here, and individuals in so-called ‘talent pools’ often receive considerable personal career attention. However this trend can reinforce the assumption that ‘ordinary’ employees don’t really have careers, and that career development is for the few not the many. It is a paradox in the UK that the only most advantaged employees receive structured career support at work, and only the most disadvantaged structured support from the state. Employed adults in ordinary jobs are clearly not seen as really needing career support, although the interesting extension of the nationally funded help-line, **learnirect**, may be starting to challenge this position.

The business case for career development can, if we are not careful, focus exclusively on the case for investing in training. Training is much more comfortable terrain for employers, but the business case here can all too easily only focus on equipping people for their current work. Training, and especially educational qualifications, has been the big focus for public policy in the UK. Public career support hangs somewhat precariously on the coat tails of interventions to get UK adults to study more. In the UK, the government funded help-line is called **learnirect** – it is not called ‘workdirect’ or ‘careerdirect’. We must remember that formal learning, both inside and outside the workplace, may facilitate career development but does not substitute for access to suitable work and to learning experiences on-the-job.

The term ‘career education’ is not generally used in the UK in relation to employed adults, but it is what employers often find they need to do to help employees manage their careers better. Career workshops for example – in the words of one of our major engineering employers – ‘aim to increase the career literacy of the workforce’.

Behind the complexity and difficulty of the business case for career development at work lie two deeper questions: who is career development really for and who it is really controlled by?

- The central paradox of career development at work is that it has to start with the needs and desires of the employee, but also brings benefits to the organisation. So positioning it as some kind of employee benefit is dangerous and profoundly mistaken. If career development is seen as just being ‘kind’ to employees, it drifts

¹ Purcell J, Kinnie N, Hutchinson S, Rayton B, Swart J (2003) *Understanding the people and performance link: unlocking the black box*. London: CIPD.

away from the reality of work opportunities within the organisation, and loses its ability to mediate in quite an explicit way between the needs of the employee and the needs of the business. Career development is for both the employee and the organisation – a duality employers find extremely difficult to handle.

- In the same way, the career is controlled by the employee (who can nearly always choose to leave the employer), but the gateways of access to both work and learning opportunities are controlled by the employer. So career development really needs to be a joint effort. Saying ‘employees manage their own careers’ is really quite misleading. There are many career moves, especially those across boundaries of organisation structure or into new types of work, which employees simply can’t make without some degree of organisational backing. In other words an open internal labour market often needs active management to get the right outcomes for both the business and for individuals.

How to integrate career development better into HR strategies and practices

General processes which influence careers at work

Career development at work is *not* mainly about giving employees career guidance or counselling. The main processes which really influence careers are:

- The way work is designed. In small firms the fluidity of job design may be the most important aspect of career development. You may not change job, but your job may grow round you.
- The normally implicit assumptions about career paths i.e. who can do what.
- Performance management processes and other mechanisms of assessment which may generate data about people used in selecting them for jobs.
- Training processes, including access to self-managed learning.
- The most important process is probably that which fills vacant jobs. The norm now is for vacant jobs to be advertised and for employees to apply for them. This is the mechanism through which employees are expected to navigate their careers in the organisation.
- Many large organisations have more structured processes for the ‘high potential’ groups mentioned earlier. Succession planning, development programmes at key transitions, personal mentoring and coaching are all widely used.
- Careers are also influenced by informal processes through which employees receive advice from others, and those with jobs to fill use their internal networks to gain intelligence on possible applicants.

Anyone seeking to make career development more effective in employing organisations needs to look carefully at these processes and ensure that they really do act to develop employees in the medium term as well as in their current jobs. To

give just one example, competence-based job filling which finds the best current candidate for the job, can work against offering people the chance to do jobs they haven't done before and often blocks even modest changes of career direction.

Career advice in the workplace

So the norm is that employees are asked to manage their own careers at work, with a bit of help from their line managers and more informal help from anyone else they can find.

In theory employees could purchase their own career support from private providers. There are private providers of career support in the UK, but they seem to get most of their work through major employers rather than purchased by individuals for themselves. The private market for outplacement services purchased by employers is well developed. There is also some purchasing of private career support for selected other employees, but usually only for very senior or high potential staff. Individuals in the UK do not have a tradition of purchasing their own career support.²

Recognising this, some employers have been developing more pro-active approaches to career support delivered in the workplace, but in a recent small-scale survey by IES as many were cutting back on career support as were putting it in. So these processes are quite frail. Where employers are using more positive approaches, they can combine more than one of the following:

- One-to-one career discussions or career workshops for groups delivered by HR or training advisers within the business.
- Self-help information and sometimes career tools made available in electronic form, often on the company intranet.
- A number of organisations have a sub-set of HR people and/or line managers acting as 'career coaches' for individuals, in addition to their normal work roles.
- As HR Shared Service organisations have grown, career issues may be handled by experts (full-time or volunteer) accessed through the HR call centre.
- A very few organisations pay people to work as specialist career coaches or career consultants with their employees. These people can be employees or external consultants. Their numbers are small.
- When large numbers of people are made redundant, outplacement companies are often used. So it is a further paradox that the group most likely to be given career support by employers are those being forced to leave.

The key issue here is to see career support in the workplace as part of the wider system of HR and management processes, not as something separate. Career

² Watts A G, Hughes D, Wood M (2005) *A Market in Career?* CeGS, University of Derby

service providers seeking to sell their services to employers do not always seem to appreciate this need.

Who is best placed to provide career support in the workplace?

In looking at how career development is supported in the workplace, we have inevitably also looked at the range of players who provide this support. They include:

- Managers in the organisation, both the individual's boss, but also a wide range of other managers they may know, including in possible roles as mentors, heads of profession etc.
- HR and training professionals, including HR people answering employee queries in HR shared service organisations.
- Occasionally people with extra training to act as career coaches on a volunteer basis. These people may be line managers and/or HR professionals. In some organisations members of Trades Unions give advice to colleagues as Learning Representatives.
- Very occasionally indeed, career professionals i.e. people whose main work is giving career support to employees.
- A whole other raft of people in and out of the organisation who give informal support and information.

How far can we go with line managers delivering career support? The immediate boss is often well placed to know the individual employees reasonably well and understand their strengths and weaknesses. However, they are not always well placed to offer career development support. Sometimes this is because of tensions this creates within the relationship, sometimes because the line manager may know very little more about career opportunities than the individual concerned. Line managers are told to ask about careers in formal appraisal discussions – not really the occasion for an open, honest and thoughtful discussion of career, especially when you are arguing about your performance bonus in the same meeting.

The potential role of the line becomes very much stronger if we think of line management as a community of people not just the individual boss. Line management collectively needs to look at possible career opportunities for employees and to be more active collectively in encouraging people to apply for suitable vacancies or engineering various kinds of work experiences. This collective responsibility is taken for granted in the processes for managing 'talent pools' but is not used widely for other employees.

If we seek to augment the role of line managers by specialists in careers work, who would we use and how? It is perhaps worth mentioning here that in the UK the term 'career professional' is quite problematic. There is no very coherent group of people with appropriate training to give in-depth career support to adults in the

workplace. Most public service career advisers in England work with young people and/or disadvantaged adults. They have thorough initial training for this role but little experience of working with employed adults or inside employing organisations. Even in Scotland and Wales where the public service remit is wider, careers advisers need to re-skill themselves considerably to work more closely with employers. Most people working as career coaches in employing organisations in the UK have not come this route at all. Some occupational psychologists enter careers work through their expertise in employee assessment. Others come via counselling and even psychoanalysis. Many learning and development professionals have entered careers work through their skills in coaching (including performance, executive and life coaching). All these groups may have strong coaching and/or counselling skills but not necessarily a strong understanding of career issues, how to help people develop their career management skills, or of internal and external labour markets. Formal courses in higher education in the UK only partially cater for people who will work on career issues with employed adults at all occupational levels and in the workplace. Some private providers of training cater more directly for this market.

Even if we had more career professionals suitably trained to work with employed adults, would employing organisations and their employees really need them? Employees certainly appreciate the option of advice from someone 'off line' – that is someone who is not in any kind of management relationship with them. But, as with mentoring, this can be a manager of HR professional from another part of the business. There are also increasing numbers of people around accustomed to offering personal support through coaching and/or counselling – career professionals have no monopoly on these helping skills. Career professionals also generally know less about work opportunities inside a business than business managers themselves or HR managers. However, there do seem to be two particular roles in organisations which are well suited to those with professional training in career guidance:

- In-depth discussions with people who need to be more aware of their own abilities or to reflect more carefully on their own aspirations, or perhaps those considering more significant changes in their work. The business case for supporting such a service is easier to make for high value employees and in organisations experiencing major change.
- Developing the skills and understanding for career support in the larger numbers of people in employing organisations who will play this role for some people, but not as their main work. In other words, experts may be most valuable in developing the capability to support career development rather than in delivering career guidance themselves.

The deeper challenges in managing and supporting careers in organisations

Looking at how career development takes place in employing organisations raises some quite fundamental issues:

- The first is the real nature of career development at work if we look beyond the rather simple 'onwards and upwards' type of career development focussed on high potential groups. Such career development for the whole workforce is very diverse in nature. We need to spend more time on the business case for encouraging people to take their own career development seriously, and helping people understand what issues career development at work might address.
- We need to look at our core HR processes, especially job design and job filling, and the role they play in facilitating career development.
- We do need to see career development as a partnership between the organisation and the employee, but our organisations are usually very poor partners at present. More collective responsibility for careers in line management may help organisations to handle the career issues of individuals in a more mature way.
- Offering effective career support is one of a number of people management issues which line managers need to get better at. Career professionals have a real contribution to make here, but cannot start from the assumption that they – and only they – are proper people to help employees consider their futures.

Further information

Fuller accounts of these issues together with practical examples and materials for managers and employees can be found in:

Wendy Hirsh and Charles Jackson, *Managing Careers in Large Organisations*, The Work Foundation. Free from www.theworkfoundation.com/research/careers.jsp

Managers as Developers of Others, Report 407, Institute for Employment Studies. www.employment-studies.co.uk

Straight talking: Effective Career Discussions at Work. NICEC Briefing. Free from www.crac.org.uk/nicec/publications/pdfs/straight_talking.pdf

Practical Tips for Effective Career Discussions at Work. NICEC Guide. Free from www.crac.org.uk/nicec/publications/pdfs/careerdiscussionpracticaltips.pdf

Some practical materials for HR managers and line managers can be found in a free toolkit for *Effective Career Discussions at Work* on the CIPD website <http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/lrnanddev/careermand/>

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