

# CAREER DEVELOPMENT: Shifting from Nicety to Necessity



By Beverly Kaye and C. Patrick Smith

It all used to be so predictable—symbolic of a simpler and more stable work-life environment. We educated ourselves in one or more areas of interest, settled into an organization that could use our talents, worked diligently to move up the corporate ladder, and collected a gold watch at the mandatory 65-year retirement age.

However, the complex interplay of social, economic, technological, and legal developments that have appeared during the past few decades have radically disrupted this long-standing pattern. The pressures of globalization, a world that has become flat, swift and chaotic economic shifts, and exponential growth in technology advances are now the new normal. American workers are seeing their livelihoods exported offshore, and many current jobs could not even be imagined by most of us five to 10 years ago. Many aging Baby Boomers can't afford to retire because of the adverse impact the recent devastating recession has placed on their personal finances.

Employees and employers alike seem at a loss to anticipate and cope with the turbulence and rapid evolution of these changes. Rather than proactively controlling their own destinies, employees find themselves in a reactive mode with diminishing personal power and productivity. It's essential for them to develop the ability to manage and direct these changes to their own benefit.

## Coming to terms with the new reality

One way to characterize the exchange between employers and employees is as a series of promises. Employers promise some level of safety and security, adequate resources to perform jobs, opportunities for development and advancement, and so on. In return, employees promise their experience and effort. The current recession effectively has forced employers to defer delivery of all sorts of promises to employees. Economic uncertainty is creating a situation where employees no longer see a direct link between how hard they work today and how their employer will respond.

The resulting challenge for managers is to find ways to stay credible and trustworthy in an environment of empty promises. Employers find themselves more

frequently asking employees to trust the company—assuring employees that better days are ahead and their efforts today will not be forgotten tomorrow. Of course, employees can be expected to endure a rough patch, but when emotions like fear and frustration become a new normal, it becomes tiresome and demoralizing. How long can employers rely on “trust me” as a way to encourage employee engagement?

To remain relevant and competitive, individuals must take preemptive action. Just as organizations face fiercer competition and the need to do more with a shrinking workforce, employees also must compete to remain vital and relevant by adapting a flexible mindset to work innovatively. Progressive career planning and development initiatives are vital to survival. These activities must be dynamic and based on sound business models. They cannot be mere events; they must be part of a systemic process with built-in sustainers to reinforce the new learning and keep the momentum going.

Career development is ideally a collaborative partnership between the individual employee, the manager or leader, and the organization. At its best it can promote job satisfaction,

**Survival of an organization depends on employees and employers working in tandem to meet career and organizational goals.**



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## What's in It for Each Partner?

### For the organization:

- Skill building—Increasing the abilities of employees in their current jobs, as well as enhancing their abilities to adapt to future changes.
- Productivity and morale—Reducing counterproductive forces such as high turnover, absenteeism, and grievances.
- Motivation—Valuing a climate of growth, challenge, and shared organizational responsibility for personal development.
- Retaining potential—Providing learning and growth opportunities that retain and engage key knowledge workers.
- Talent matching—Supplying sufficient information to individuals so they can match their abilities to the changing need of the organization.

### For the leader or manager:

- Communication—Increasing communication about current performance and future opportunities.
- Information—Providing better information about changing needs and challenges.
- Goal clarity—Clarifying organizational and unit goals and how they fit with individual tasks.
- Identification—Supporting efforts to identify employees with skills and abilities.
- Performance feedback—Setting the stage for easier performance reviews by enhancing individuals' knowledge of their strengths and developmental needs before their managers formally appraise their work.

### For the employees:

- Self-knowledge—Understanding personal strengths and weaknesses, as well as needs for the future.
- Sense of purpose—Focusing on meaning in work.
- Skill building—Learning new skills that can aid in accomplishing current tasks and also provide wider options for the future.
- Job enrichment—Recognizing that career growth begins in the current job and that challenge and stimulation can increase without necessarily changing current positions.
- Work-life balance—Potential to gain a quality of life based on individual needs and wants.

engagement, productivity, and discretionary effort. While the individual employee has the primary responsibility for his own career, the leader must be a supportive coach and the organization must provide the necessary resources, systems, and information.

When career development initiatives truly recognize this partnership, a vital link between individual and organizational goals and objectives can be realized. It can become the vehicle for implementing the talent management aspect of a company's strategic plan by formulating a framework for optimum development. In this sense, it is not simply just another talent management activity but an integrating force that systematically ties existing processes

together so that the individual and organizational growth can be supported.

### Connecting the dots

Too many organizations still dismiss talent management as a short-term challenge rather than an integral part of a long-term business strategy that requires the attention of top-level management and necessary resources. Research shows that top performers are leaving their jobs, even in today's dismal employment environment. The better the results they achieve, the more confident they are about their ability to succeed elsewhere.

One quarter of top performers intend to leave their company, according to a study by the Corporate Leadership

Council. Some 42 percent of employers are increasingly concerned that other companies are prepared to poach their top talent, reports Challenger, Gray & Christmas. Competitors are recruiting top performers right now in preparation for a business rebound, knowing that companies that strengthen themselves during an economic slowdown bounce back fastest when the inevitable upturn comes.

Forward-thinking companies today are taking strong action to counter this trend by demanding regularly scheduled, intentional career development conversations. Much like a "stay conversation" (described in *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay*) that addresses an employee's wants and needs for engagement and retention purposes, the "career development conversation" focuses on the skills, behaviors, values, and interests that an employee brings to the workplace. This conversation, when done effectively, focuses on helping employees reach their maximum potential and keeps them engaged by leveraging those areas so that growth is satisfying to both the individual and the organization.

Efficiency, profitability, corporate growth, and even survival of the organization itself depend on maximum use and development of workforce talent (all of the talent, not just those considered to be high potentials). Employee engagement is strongly linked to business performance. Engaged workers generate more profit, create stronger customer relationships, have fewer safety incidents, are less likely to quit, and are more productive than disengaged workers.

A company cannot succeed in meeting its corporate goals if it is plagued by disengagement and turnover. Determining not only how to attract, but also to retain and fully use talented and innovative employees, while simultaneously satisfying their personal agendas, has become a basic corporate necessity.

### Employees want more

The rising interest in the career development partnership has been stimulated by heightened (or at

least more vociferously articulated) employee desires such as

- more career opportunities
- more participation in decision making
- more meaningful work that contributes to community and society
- more job challenges and satisfaction
- more attention to the person or job match
- more on-the-job learning
- more flexible work schedules in support of work-life balance
- more openness and trust
- more interest in enhancing general employability.

None of these can be achieved by the individual in a vacuum. Employees who are dissatisfied with any of the above areas no longer are willing to be mollified even by the traditional motivators of money or status. Some who leave find that the grass is not greener. These same individuals return to the doorstep of the original employer hoping to fix a situation that may not have been all that broken in the first place. Time and effort that goes into bringing these revelations to the forefront sooner could prevent a loss for both the individual and the organization.

Employees also are prepared to strive for a new lease on working life by taking matters into their own hands instead of waiting for their organizations to rescue them. The spectacular sales records of self-help books point to a population that is ready to assume responsibility for its own career decisions. Today's workers do not show the blind faith or undying loyalty to their employers; their first loyalty is to themselves.

Perhaps both sides must forge a new relationship, based not so much on mutual loyalty as on mutual benefits. In return for 100 percent of their employees' mindshare and dedication to the work at hand, employers can offer them an opportunity to satisfy their needs in-house. This can be achieved through career conversations that are mutually satisfying for employees and employers alike.

### What's an organization to do?

As the workforce grows in its diversity,

additional challenges and opportunities become clear. Alternative work schedules are prevalent, and not just for new moms. Families living in the "sandwich generation" are finding a need for flexibility to care for aging parents as well as young children.

Life as we know it has changed and the boundaries are as diverse as the individual. It is critical that employers understand the true needs of every employee and what they are facing when they depart the workplace every day. A work environment that fosters genuine care and concern for employees will get their extra effort.

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Business unit heads and line leaders must develop the capabilities of their employees, nurture their careers, and manage their performance. HR professionals, meanwhile, need to improve their ability to translate business needs into talent strategies. Top-performing companies consistently instill the mindset and culture needed to manage talent effectively. A strong people culture reinforces a key part of a company's employee value propositions.

Alas, many current initiatives are less effective than they might be because they are not integrated closely with one another, do not leverage the relationship between the individual and her manager, and do not take into account the actual career interests of employees.

### An integrated effort

A carefully planned and thoughtfully implemented career development program can combat this lack of integration by requiring a career development conversation. This conversation could help employees identify skills and interests and match these to job responsibilities,

highlight unique abilities and encourage growth, enable communication of needs (personal and professional) and aspirations to the organization, understand the perception others hold about abilities through valid feedback vehicles, and empower continuous development and encourage learning possibilities.

A full range of talent management problems, characterized by such symptoms as frequent turnover, skill deficiencies, low morale, or reduced productivity, can be addressed by a well-designed career development effort. If it is seen as central, it can give deeper meaning to the variety of talent management activities within the organization, thus strengthening the human resource links within the organization.

An integrated effort between the organization and the employee can go a long way toward achieving the partnership. By understanding the expectations of the enterprise, employees can be encouraged to be creative and assertive in how they apply their strengths and subsequent development. Furthermore, by understanding the position of the employee, the organization can leverage the skills, desires, and passions that the employee is looking to unleash in ways that directly support the strategic goals.

This forward-thinking approach multiplies the positive outcomes and affects the bottom line in a way that is a win-win for all involved. As this becomes a standard operating procedure, the process is no longer a nicety; it is necessary to the way the organization does business and supports its mission. These new directions have the potential to leverage the discretionary efforts of all involved.

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