

Career Development at Work: issues affecting the provision of career support for people in employment

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This paper summarises the main findings from a research study to review the career support provided to people in employment. The research was commissioned by CEDEFOP and carried out by a team from the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC).

The research study (Jackson *et al.*, forthcoming) set out to review the range of career guidance provision that supports workforce development across the 25 EU member states and to identify innovative or 'best practice' provision. The focus is on how career development support is being provided to employed workers.

Our study builds on the series of studies carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and the European Training Foundation which are summarised in the three key synthesis reports (OECD, 2004; Sultana 2004; Watts and Fretwell, 2004). However, these studies focused primarily on public-sector guidance provision and the role of governments.

There are two main reasons for paying attention to the career development issues of people in employment: one is for people and businesses to realise their full potential, and the other is to enable people and businesses to manage change more effectively. Ongoing and incremental change in the structure of employment opportunities is one reason why the career development of employed workers is an important issue for the European economy.

It is important to recognise that delivering career development support to people in employment is not only a critical activity for the development of a knowledge economy, but also for the well-being of individuals and society.

In this paper we set out to provide a brief overview of the main findings from our research and present examples of

the range of career support initiatives that employers and others are putting in place. We also highlight the key issues that emerge from our analysis of existing provision and identify trends shaping the development of career support. Our main conclusion is that sustained and focused effort is required to address the concern raised in the communiqué from the Third International Symposium on Career Development and Public Policy held in Sydney in April 2006 that:

'In many developed countries, a major current deficiency is adequate career development support for existing workers.'

The research

The project aimed to review the range of career support provided for employed adults both inside (the main emphasis) and outside the workplace. We were looking to identify innovative and best practice provision and the report includes 38 case studies, some of which are quite detailed accounts of practice by employers, trade unions, the public sector as well as other intermediaries.

Our research also draws on the body of work that has been done in the UK and elsewhere on employer practice in this area. We were particularly concerned to see whether experience gathered by research with employers in the UK (Hirsh and Jackson, 1996; Hirsh and Jackson, 2004; Bysshe, 2006) was replicated elsewhere.

It is obviously very difficult to paint an accurate and detailed picture of what is going on across so many different countries. Nevertheless there are always risks in making generalisations about trends and experience and the usual caveats apply – there are big differences in experience – between countries, between employers and also between individuals. Our aim was to capture the diversity of practice and not to present an exhaustive catalogue of provision. However, Table 1 captures what we feel are the main factors affecting the career support given to employed people by different providers.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Guidance for Workforce Development Conference, organised by CEDEFOP and held in Thessaloniki, Greece 25-26 June 2007.

Table 1: Factors affecting career development activity

Providers	Target groups	Focus of activity	Sustainability	Other issues
Large employers	Highly skilled 'talent' groups. Rest of workforce (sometimes).	Leadership/career development of talent groups. Development for current job.	Commitment to supporting the wider workforce often variable. Concerns about employability cyclical.	Opportunity to make more use of informal support and ICT-based self-help materials. Rarely involve guidance professionals (except for outplacement).
SMEs	Variable. More likely to focus on key people, areas of skill shortage or where economic development a priority.	Focus likely to vary with need.	Often dependent on external support.	Fear of people leaving can be a factor limiting development activity. Access to SMEs can be difficult.
Trade unions	Many initiatives target the less skilled or focus on those at risk of unemployment. Some target moderate to high skill groups.	Main focus on engaging people in learning. More now focusing on career development.	Availability or continuity of funding can be an issue. Initiatives targeted at the less skilled often supported by EU EQUAL or governments.	Involvement of employers critical for success and increases sustainability. Role for EU/governments in promoting social partnership.
Outplacement/coaching consultancies	Level of support depends on ability to pay. So provision favours higher skilled.	Job placement. Leadership development/coaching.	Usually engaged by large employers.	Greater use of ICT and self-help materials may extend range of support.
Self-help/peer support	Favours moderate to high skill groups who are more able to participate in these activities.	Networking and information sharing.	Some initiatives have received start-up funding but continuity a problem. Often depends on goodwill/ energy of participants and key individuals.	Partnership and start-up funding might stimulate development.
Professional bodies/associations	Mainly focused on professional/high skill groups.	Valuable source of specialised information. Limited range of support. Mainly ICT-based but some printed material. Some establish networks of members to advise others.	Provision of information on entry routes and qualification requirements tends to be sustained. More active advisory services less embedded.	May have a role in certification. Often have CPD requirements. Not always an impartial source of information.

Table 1: Factors affecting career development activity (continued)

Providers	Target groups	Focus of activity	Sustainability	Other issues
Recruitment consultancies/ temporary work agencies	Focus on high-skill groups and certain employment sectors.	Significant source of specialist labour market information in some sectors. Information on job application process valuable to new/ re-entrants to the labour market. Temporary work assignments provide opportunity to gain work experience in a new area. Some offer training as well as work placements.	If adds value to candidates and results in better placements.	Use of ICT and self-help materials may extend range of support.
PES	Most focus on less skilled. In some cases employed people excluded from service. Some starting to work with employers, especially SMEs.	Job placement. Formal learning. Increasing use of self-service/ICT.	Strong economic and social case for social inclusion.	Ability to cater for highly skilled groups or to provide specialised labour market information, without partnerships with sectoral agencies, may be questionable. Often have a poor image with employers and employed adults due to current focus on low skilled/unemployed.
Publicly-funded careers services	Have tended to focus on less skilled. Some starting to work with employers, especially SMEs.	Skill review. Formal learning. Increasing use of self-service/ICT.	Funding for services to employed people and for work with employers often uncertain. Some national funding models offer access to long-term support (e.g. employer training levies).	Ability to cater for highly skilled groups or to provide specialised labour market information, without partnerships with sectoral agencies, sometimes questionable.

Main findings

1. The lack of effective career development support for the majority of the employed workforce

There is a paradox – employers focus their effort on what they identify as the ‘talent’ groups – managers, future leaders, and people with scarce skills (i.e. groups that are in high demand in the labour market). On the other hand, governments and the public sector focus on the unemployed, economically inactive, low skilled and disadvantaged groups. As a result most of us fall in the gap and are not catered for either by employer-based provision or government/public-sector provision.

Our review suggests that there are no clear processes for career development inside many organisations and that what provision there is, is often only focused on key talent groups such as graduates and managers. It is assumed that other employees will get help and advice from their line manager and informally. It is also assumed that normal training and job filling processes give employees the access and information they need about job opportunities. There are some notable exceptions. Nokia is one example described in our report and the Nationwide case study presented below is another. There are also important public sector initiatives, such as Bilan de Competence in France and learndirect in the UK, which have a substantial proportion of employed people among their clients.

A number of our case studies describe public sector initiatives with small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Many SMEs are unable or unwilling to fund effective career development support. Our report describes work with SMEs in Austria, Belgium and Sweden. The case studies show how SMEs, and the community in which they are located, benefit from regional and local co-ordination and co-operation in the development and delivery of support designed to meet specific local or sector needs.

2. The increasing role for intermediaries in the provision of career development support

A second key finding from our analysis of trends in career development provision is that both policy makers and career guidance practitioners have often failed to recognise the diverse sources of career development support that are becoming available to people – particularly over the internet. Changing economic circumstances and new technology are changing the ways people look for work – both inside and outside organisations. This has given rise to an increasing range of intermediary organisations offering some form of career guidance alongside their other activities.

For many people a web search is likely to be the starting point of any search for career advice. There is greater use of self-help and peer support with a very diverse set of players including specialist information providers, recruitment websites and professional organisations now all supplying increasing amounts of career information and advice – albeit some is partial and limited.

Peer-to-peer web-based support is also becoming much more significant as Web 2.0 technology and specialist social networking sites become more widely available. The development of virtual community websites, two of which are described in our report, for example, draws on the fact that people already working in a particular field are an excellent source of information. The role of virtual community websites and other forms of informal career support are likely to become more significant.

Trade unions are also becoming more active. Trade union-led work in the UK, Finland, the Czech Republic, Germany and Denmark is discussed in our report. Key lessons from our trade union case studies include: a) their reliance on volunteers for the successful delivery of face-to-face based services; b) the importance of training for these volunteers; and c) the need for co-ordination and support to underpin both the initial development of services and their on-going evolution and maintenance (e.g. to recruit and train future volunteers, provide and update resources).

Trade union activity shows the importance of advice and guidance as a critical activity prior to engaging in learning or development. The perceived credibility and trust that trade union members have in their co-workers providing these services has also been an important factor in their success.

We are also seeing changing recruitment practices partly because labour markets are becoming more complex and specialised. This has been greatly facilitated by the growth of internet-based recruitment. This has meant that the widening diversity of potential sources of career support has also been accompanied by some degree of blurring of the boundaries between recruitment and career support. This includes, for instance, companies and recruitment sites making available self-help career tools on their websites. As a recent report by the UK think-tank, Demos, points out (Gallagher, and O’Leary, 2007) relational recruitment practices based on networking and referral are becoming more important and this has implications for how career support is provided to people in employment.

3. The importance of career management skills

Every year, perhaps as many as one in six people change jobs. Although many will be involuntary (e.g. redundancy, end of short term contracts), many others are voluntary and might involve a move to a better or more interesting job, or a change of career direction. Many people also make major career transitions but stay with their existing employer: for example taking on a new role, perhaps as a result of organisational restructuring.

Giving people the skills to manage these transitions better is critical. Some need support but many others will cope successfully on their own if they have had the opportunity to develop the skills necessary for making effective transitions.

A major rationale for career development is to enable individuals and employers to handle change more effectively. Ongoing change is the one certainty in life as far as employment is concerned.

It is also important to realise that most of us pursue and develop our careers in highly specialised labour markets – either in a locality, a business sector, or a specialised field. As labour markets, themselves, become more complex and specialised, lack of understanding of how a particular labour market operates can in itself be a major barrier to getting a job even for those with the necessary qualifications (Jackson, 1996; Jackson, 2007).

A major role for career and HR professionals is to help people become more self-reliant by embedding opportunities to acquire career management skills within their career interventions. Recognising that much career support comes from informal sources, such as line managers, work colleagues, there is also a need for career and HR professional to recognise their role in building the capacity of informal support so that it will be more effective.

Employer case study of innovative practice

One example of an organisation that set out to provide career development support to all its employees is described by Hirsh and Jackson (2004). It shows how introducing a linked set of initiatives led to significant positive outcomes for the business. It is an important example of the business benefits of providing effective career development support to the whole workforce. In the late 1990s the Nationwide Building Society identified career development as an area of dissatisfaction for their employees. Employee surveys had indicated that employees were unclear about career opportunities and about the processes they should use to develop their careers.

As a result Nationwide set out to develop an approach of offering career development support to all its employees aligned to a business goal of achieving high levels of employee commitment. It achieved this by providing comprehensive career information and advice based on a philosophy of partnership. There were three main ways that support was provided:

1. Individuals were encouraged to discuss their careers with their line managers using a simple 'Career Planner' framework. These discussions build on, but are separate from, the annual performance review.
2. The company intranet was used to provide access to a range of self-help career planning tools, information on career options and job vacancies. Individuals are able to search for a particular type of job or register their interest in the sort of job that interests them.

3. Individuals can also contact the central Career and Leadership Development Team which offers independent advice via email and the telephone. This team also runs career workshops.

Nationwide has tracked how well it is seen as delivering on its career promise and how this indicator relates to employee satisfaction, commitment and retention. Results from their employee survey indicate that 75% of employees felt they had the opportunity for personal development and growth compared with less than a third in companies against which they benchmark. Lower than average staff turnover for the sector is also estimated to save over £8 million a year and profit chain analysis has shown that career development support impacts on employee engagement and commitment, which in turn leads to customer satisfaction and loyalty and hence sales and business growth.

Trends in career development provision

The main trend across all sectors – that is across both the public sector, employer-led and initiatives by intermediaries – is the move to self-help strategies for career support. It is probably the only way of delivering significant increases in capacity without a very significant increased in resources. The main features of these initiatives are:

1. use of ICT (including call centres and the internet) to provide career advice and guidance
2. greater availability of self-help career exploration packages/programmes
3. web-based job search/information facilities are increasingly available and becoming the norm
4. the growth of on-line recruitment (both inside organisations and externally)
5. tiering of levels of career support by offering different levels of support depending on an initial assessment of an individual's needs
6. the use of specialist social networking sites as sources of information and advice. Although still very new, such sites are likely to have a major impact on where people go when they are looking for advice and information about specialised labour markets

What is apparent from these trends is that much career support is being provided informally and not by career professionals.

At the same time we are also seeing a growth in career coaching (usually for those talent groups and funded by employers). Coaching is primarily designed to focus on skill development and behaviour change to deliver improved performance. Much coaching is aimed to improve the performance and leadership skills of managers and most coaches are brought in from outside an organisation, although some employers are starting to emphasise the coaching role of managers in relation to the employees that work for them and contrast this to other roles that managers have as leaders, managers and mentors.

Challenges in developing more effective career support

Our research suggested that there are some major challenges in developing more effective career support for people in employment.

1. Lack of continuity in support

Lack of continuity in funding or lack of will and support has often led to promising initiatives in this area being discontinued. This has affected initiatives in the public sector as well as initiatives by employers and intermediaries. Many initiatives in the public sector or provided by social partners have only received short-term funding. There is also evidence that initiatives by employers are similarly prone to abrupt changes dictated by economic circumstances or business priorities. This lack of continuity in support is, in our view, a prime cause of the fragility and weakness of many interventions designed to bolster career development. For example, relationships which have been carefully built up over time can easily be shattered by the sudden withdrawal of a service.

2. Language and terminology differences between professional groups

These inhibit collaboration between career guidance professionals mainly working in the public sector and HR professionals working in companies. Both about focus of activity – i.e. who benefits? Is it the individual or the individual and the organisation? – and about the independence of support.

‘Career guidance’ and ‘career advice’ are usually seen by guidance professionals as both independent and primarily benefiting the individual, even though it may be recognised that there are societal benefits and possibly also benefits for employers from these activities. In contrast, career development at work and talent management in particular, are usually seen as benefiting both the individual and their employer and as being to some extent organisationally driven.

Our research and experience suggests that, in practice, career support by employers is usually seen by employees as impartial (i.e. independent) even though it is being given by someone employed by the organisation.

Real career development has a longer term payoff for individuals and the organisation through such outcomes as better relationships, improved skills, and more confident negotiation about the future. It is a strategy for eliciting commitment to the organisation – going the extra mile to achieve superior performance, as the Nationwide example illustrated.

The issue for organisations and the people they employ is to create effective partnerships. In the literature on stakeholding, effective stakeholder engagement is about

creating ‘win-win’ situations for organisations and their stakeholders (Partridge *et al.*, 2005). Successful partnerships create value for both parties.

Similarly it can be argued that effective employee engagement requires organisations to work in partnership with their employees and that this will result in benefits for both parties – employers and employees. In this context, it is clear that career development activities will only be effective and sustainable if they lead to benefits (that is create value) for both the individual and their employer. Activities that only benefit one party are unlikely to be sustainable in the longer term.

3. Characteristics of internal labour markets

Internal labour markets are often relatively small and people are known. Handling one’s familiarity successfully inside an organisation presents challenges and can make openness and candour difficult. On the other hand, it can make it easier to know who to speak to and facilitate informal support through networking.

The quality of personal relationships can be extremely important. Inside organisations, information about job opportunities may be available and/or known about before a post is formally advertised (and posts may also be tailored to a known candidate). There are strong similarities with the situation in small states (see Sultana, 2006).

An important role for career development interventions inside organisations is to empower individuals who do not have effective personal networks. This is especially important in relation to equality of opportunity.

4. Increasingly specialised labour markets

The growing importance of knowledge work means that the labour market is becoming both more complex and more specialised. As we have already pointed out lack of understanding of how the labour market operates can be a major barrier to participation (especially, but not exclusively, for new entrants and job changers). A particular challenge for guidance professionals is to help people acquire the detailed labour market knowledge and career management skills that they require. One question is whether career professionals have the necessary degree of labour market knowledge and expertise themselves to provide effective support to people working in these new and increasingly specialised labour markets.

Learning points – what have we learnt? If we are serious about developing services:

1. Partnership working

We must recognise that not only will there always be diversity in provision. (It is required to meet specialised needs.) but that partnerships work best when parties have clearly defined mutual interests. While the lifelong learning

agenda brings together governments, employers and unions for example, it is often more difficult to involve SMEs (but our report contains some examples of work being done involving SMEs). While it is important to foster a collaborative approach to career support and recognise the benefits from diversity in provision, there will always be some tensions. For example career guidance may lead to employees leaving their present employment and finding better jobs elsewhere and this may put governments, unions and employers at odds with each other.

2. Paying for career support

Individuals rarely pay for career support or if they do it is subsidised. People who most need support are often the least likely to be able to fund it. However, it would be extremely short-sighted to limit their access to support. On the other hand, many employers do pay for career development support. First, they frequently pay for coaching, assessment and development support for individuals from key talent groups (e.g. senior managers, etc). Secondly, they also regularly pay for advice and support on learning and development activities. Thirdly, they usually fund outplacement activity.

In the public sector, some countries have used training levies to fund services. Another option is to give individuals an entitlement to funding through training vouchers or learning accounts. This is seen as one way of moving from a supply-led approach to demand-led one and for governments to stimulate the market.

3. Marketing the benefits of career development support

We underestimate the role of marketing, or promotion, to make people aware of the importance of career development. Several of our case studies found that they had to put considerable effort into marketing their services. It is not self-evident to many people that career development is a good thing and considerable persistence is needed to build up a relationship with both employers and employees. Having convenient access in non-threatening locations may be a key factor for some groups. Essentially this means taking the time and making the effort to understand the concerns of the key stakeholders involved. The importance of marketing in increasing take-up has almost certainly been underestimated, and there may be a key role for government in marketing the advantages of career planning *per se*, to encourage individuals to look for it in the form and location most appropriate to them.

4. Service development

Development of innovative services has often relied on specialist input for activities such as training, development of resources, and the setting of professional standards. A variety of types of organisation have a role to play: professional associations for guidance workers, educational

institutions that train them, national and regional organisations of employers or trade unions, sectoral organisations, PES etc. It is clear that a range of expertise is required and that no one profession or organisation has a monopoly on that expertise. We need to recognise the role of these bodies as enabling forces in the development of effective services. Once again collaboration is crucial and this requires funding and support.

The way forward

While some progress has been made in improving access to guidance and the quality of guidance systems, since the EU Council Resolution on Lifelong Guidance in 2004, significant challenges remain. A knowledge-based economy needs to make good use of the skills and potential of its citizens. There is, therefore, a need to strike a balance between targeted initiatives for particular groups and some effective level of career development support for everyone.

1. The need for a strategic framework for coherent provision

Too often career development is thought about as a series of separate initiatives either targeted at particular client groups or to tackle specific problems. Just as the DOTS framework² (Law and Watts, 1977) has proved useful in shaping careers education and services designed to assist the vocational preparation of people entering the labour market for the first time, so the building of effective career development support for employed adults requires a clear framework of underlying objectives. One framework is the model suggested by Hirsh *et al.* (1995). They suggest that there are five purposes for such activities which apply equally to the individual and the organisation:

- i. **Assessment:** activities to provide the individual and organisation with the opportunity to learn about the individual's strengths, weaknesses, interests, etc.
- ii. **Career options:** activities to assist individuals' and their managers' understanding of current and future career and job options.
- iii. **Action planning:** planning of specific, concrete, time-based learning activities by individuals and organisations.
- iv. **Skill development:** activities to promote or deliver skill development.
- iii. **Vacancy filling:** activities designed to manage the internal labour market in line with business needs and organisational culture.

Organisations can use a wide variety of processes to deliver these objectives. However, the methods for designing and structuring most career development activities are well understood (see, for example, Jackson, 1990; Arnold, 1997). The key issue is putting together a coherent set of interventions that address each of the five underlying objectives.

¹ The DOTS framework suggests that there are four broad aims for careers work (Decision learning; Opportunity awareness; Transition learning; Self-awareness). These are also seen as the learning outcomes of careers education and guidance activities.

At present the fragmentation of many existing services leads to gaps in coverage as far as employed people are concerned. The strategic intent of any framework is to achieve coherence in provision. The multiplicity of sources of career development support for people in employment also means that there is a need to make more people aware of the range of sources of career support available, as well as their strengths and weaknesses.

2. Sharing costs

More effective career development at work will assist the development of a knowledge economy and benefit individuals, employers and society at large. This is an argument for costs to be shared between individuals, employers and governments. However, as noted above both individuals and SMEs often find it difficult to justify the costs involved and this means that governments (i.e. the community at large) should consider subsidising the provision of career support to some beneficiaries.

3. Guidance professionals need to build bridges and links to other professional groups

Our research has indicated that career development support does not just come from guidance professionals. There is a need for guidance professionals and the professional associations that represent them to build bridges and links to other professional groups that advise employers on strategic HR issues and/or deliver support to individuals and their managers on HR development. There are also new roles for career and HR professionals as the trainers, co-ordinators and supporters of people who give career support on an informal basis.

4. The need for more effective dialogue and communication

The arguments for paying more attention to career development are particularly relevant to the debate about how to develop a knowledge economy. Lack of clarity about the role and contribution of career development support is illustrated by discontinuities in service provision and confusion over language and terminology. This has undoubtedly hampered the development of provision, particularly for employed workers.

In our view the challenge is as much one of communication as one of the form or development of provision. While there is clearly a significant gap in the provision of career development support for people in employment, service development requires agreement by the key stakeholders – governments, employers and social partners – on how best to approach an issue that is so central to the EU's future economic development.

Development of a strategy requires effective dialogue between key stakeholders: governments, employers, social partners and intermediaries. Governments, social partners (employers and trade unions) and CEDEFOP need to identify the levers and policy arguments. In particular, it is

important to consider what forceful messages we can give to these key stakeholders who have the power to shape the development of career support for people in employment.

Career development vision

Our vision is of individuals being able to make informed choices about work and lifelong learning. It is about seeing the links between what goes on inside organisations and what goes on outside. There often appears to be a disconnect between what governments do which often focuses on increasing the labour market participation of the unemployed, economically inactive and disadvantaged groups and what goes on inside organisations with a focus on the skill and career development of the current workforce.

A significant challenge for employers and governments is the poor understanding of the business case for career development and the links between the government and business agenda. This is not helped by the significant differences in terminology and language noted above. Nevertheless, this research has found examples of businesses benefiting significantly from having effective career development strategies in place for all their employees.

It is also important to be aware how the labour market is changing, that is to understand the context in which people are working and where future employment growth will be concentrated. Brinkley and Lee (2006) point out that most of the new jobs across the EU15 have come from the expansion of knowledge-based industries. Employment in knowledge-based industries in the EU15 increased by 24% from 1995 to 2005, while employment in the rest of the economy increased by just under 6%. The latest economic forecasts from the European Commission (2006) suggest that, in the EU as a whole, 7 million new jobs will be created over the period 2006-2008.

At a time of rapid economic and social change, we ignore the career development of people in employment at our peril.

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