Career Development in Employing Organisations: practices and challenges from a UK perspective

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This paper considers the nature of career development within employing organisations and its implications for the role of employers in offering career support to employed adults. Although based on research evidence and practical experience from the UK (described for example, in Hirsh and Jackson, 2004), recent research for CEDEFOP indicates that the issues explored here also seem likely to be of relevance to other European countries (Jackson et al., 2008).

We will consider:

- *what* we might mean by career development for adults in employment

- *why* employers should concern themselves with 'careers' and why they have some concerns about supporting career development

- *how* career development takes place in the workplace and what processes support it

- *who* is best placed to provide career support for employees

- some suggested actions and issues for employers and for government.

The nature of careers and career development in employing organisations

When we think about career development in the workplace, we need to remember that the UK has a diverse population of employed adults, especially in terms of their levels and range of skills. The UK also has a very diverse mix of employing organisations, ranging from large global companies and government departments through many medium-sized employers in public, private and voluntary sectors, to a host of small firms. Although this paper is mostly based on experience of working with larger employers, we should not assume that small firms are necessarily less sophisticated in their employment strategies, although their processes for workforce development may be less formalised. The term 'career' in the context of the workplace can be seen most simply 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 the experiences of working on varied projects. Career moves in organisations are very often sideways rather than upwards, and may cross departmental, geographical or functional boundaries.

In this paper we will talk about 'career development' and 'career support' for employees rather than 'career guidance'. This is partly because formal one-to-one 'career guidance' is not often provided in the workplace, and professionals trained as specialists in career guidance are not often employed by large organisations. Human resources (HR) or personnel professionals are usually present in all but the smallest organisations, and often get involved in offering career development support in a variety of ways. However, they would not normally use the term 'career guidance' for such activities. We will also describe a range of activities and processes, facilitated by line management as well as HR, which contribute to career development and career support inside organisations. Formalised in-depth discussion of career issues or career plans – implied by the term 'career guidance' – is only a very small part of the overall picture.

Some elements of 'career development' from the individual's perspective

In order to manage their own careers over time within an employing organisation, and in the labour market more broadly, an individual will usually need to engage with five main areas of thinking and action as shown on Figure 1.

The top part of this model will be very familiar to guidance professionals, with self-knowledge on one side and appreciation of career options on the other. In career planning the individual needs to consider not just their own interests and aspirations, but also what kind of opportunities may be open to *someone like them*. These opportunities may be both inside and outside their current organisation. General career information, even inside a particular organisation, is of limited value to individuals without an understanding of how they are seen by the people in their organisation, and for what kinds of jobs they might be considered a credible candidate. So feedback from others is an important input to self-knowledge.

Inside an organisation, career planning is often about using discussions and advice to inform a personal plan or sense of direction. However, further discussions and negotiation are often needed to gain support from others in the organisation who have the power to give access to work or learning opportunities (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995).

Figure 1: Career development from the individual's perspective
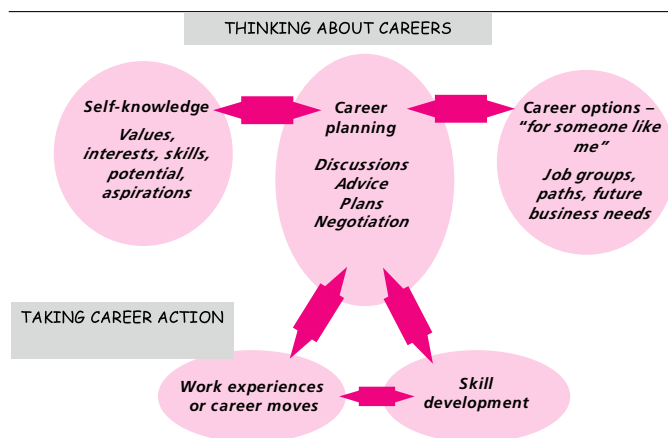
The bottom of Figure 1 links career planning to taking action, both in terms of accessing work experiences, including making job moves, and accessing formal and more personalised forms of learning. Such action involves navigating a range of formal and informal processes, and gaining support from a range of people. Individuals need career skills to achieve such action, just as much as they do to frame their own career plans or decisions.

All these areas of thinking and action can reasonably be considered to be included within 'career development' for individuals in employment. From the employer's point of view, supporting career development means supporting individuals in all these aspects, not just in thinking about careers but also in taking career action. Employers will only do this if they can see career development as supporting the needs of the business, not just the desires of employees.

Why should employers take positive action to support careers?

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

'Career' holds out both opportunities and threats to an employing organisation. Among its threatening elements are its focus on the future (which is often difficult to discuss); 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 to go to 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 (for example Purcell et al., 2003). 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, and probably in most developed economies, that only the most advantaged employees receive structured career support at work, and only the most disadvantaged receive structured support from the state. The vast majority of employees fall down a gap between the two.

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 without a career perspective it tends to focus only on equipping people for their current work. Training, and especially raising the level of educational qualifications among less skilled adults, is a major plank of public employment policy in the UK. Public career support hangs somewhat precariously on the coat tails of interventions to get UK adults to study more. 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.

Given this context, career guidance needs have a rather different emphasis when applied to employed adults than when it is a service for young people or the unemployed. It is probably less about vocational choice and access to formal education and far more about navigating the internal labour market and politics of organisational life. The somewhat ambivalent attitudes of employers to career development place more complex demands on workplace career support, and external guidance services need to be very sensitive to the concerns of employers if they are to work with them successfully.

What processes support career development?

We have already said that career development in the workplace involves a wide range of processes and activities. Some of the most important enablers of career development would not generally be seen as career processes at all. For example, job design has a key influence, both on how much development is possible within a job role, and in whether job roles are designed with progression between them in mind. The job filling process is also critical, especially in determining who can apply for vacant jobs or project opportunities; how candidates are short-listed and then selected; and whether managers are willing to let someone try a job they have not done before. Access to training, including self-managed learning and support for gaining qualifications, can be important in opening up career pathways for existing employees to jobs which require particular skills or qualifications. The performance management or appraisal process often generates information which is used in internal selection decisions, and so this also influences careers.

In addition to these 'core' HR processes, many large organisations have more structured processes for supporting the career development of the 'high potential' groups mentioned earlier. Graduate entry schemes, succession planning, talent pools, development programmes at key transitions, personal mentoring and coaching are widely used, but usually only for selected groups of employees.

Careers are also influenced by informal processes though which employees receive advice from others, and those with jobs to fill use their internal networks to gain intelligence on possible applicants. These informal processes are very important and should not be seen in a negative way (Hirsh et al., 2001). Employees may need more encouragement to use informal career support effectively.

So the norm is that most employees are expected 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.

So where does 'career guidance' fit in? In theory employees could purchase their own career support from private providers. There are specialist private providers of career support in the UK, often called 'career coaches', 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 coaching for selected other employees, but usually only for very senior or high potential staff. Executive coaching or mentoring may also cover career development issues. Individuals in the UK, however, do not have a tradition of purchasing their own in-depth career guidance (Watts et al., 2005), and neither do most of their employers.

## Who is best placed to provide career support for employees?

Recognising the lack of career support for the majority of employees, some major employers have been developing more pro-active approaches to supporting career development in the workplace. Hirsh and Jackson (2004) and Yarnall (2008) describe some of these in more detail.

Where employers are using more positive approaches, they can combine more than one of the following:

- Strengthening the support given by line managers by, for example, more collective processes for reviewing and supporting the skill and career development needs of employees.

- One-to-one career discussions or career workshops for groups delivered by HR or training advisers within the business.

- Self-help information on career options, learning opportunities and sometimes career planning tools made available in electronic form, often on the company intranet.

- The use of volunteer 'career coaches', usually a sub-set of HR people and/or line managers, who are given special training and provide career support, often to people they don't know, 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 service centre, often by telephone.

- 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.

- 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.

- Other external services may be used by employees including *learndirect Advice*, a national telephone helpline which can offer limited, but free, career support to all adults and more in-depth support to those with low levels of qualifications. In Scotland and Wales there has been some growth of support to employers from publicly funded careers services, but mostly around training issues and/or dealing with redundancy. For professional employees, their professional bodies may offer career support, usually through informal networking and events, and often provide structured continuing professional development (CPD). Other employees may be able to access support through their trade union.

So there are a range of models for delivering improved career support to employees, some of which are shown on Figure 2. It might be helpful if employers think about using several complementary source of career support to give employees more than one place they can go for help, especially if they find talking to their own manager difficult or if their manager lacks the information or skill to help them. We can think about providing a 'web' of career support – nothing to do with the internet but in the sense of a spider's web – a linked set of interventions within a unified strategy.

Figure 2: Considering a possible 'web' of different sources of career support
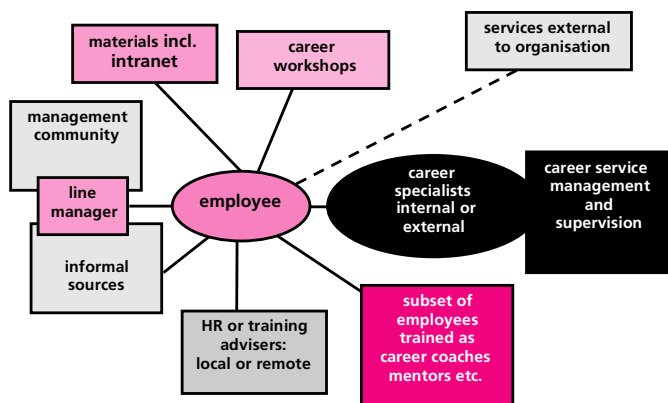
All interventions to improve career support for the whole workforce still seem quite vulnerable. For example, some very large UK employers have set up quite ambitious networks of internal, volunteer career coaches, for example, and then later cut the one post required to support and co-ordinate such a network. The case for positive career development for all employees, which we examined earlier, is still not strong enough for most employers to commit resources to enhanced career support in a consistent way. Studies by the professional body for HR in the UK – the CIPD – show that employers still find investing in career development problematic (CIPD, 2003).

So should we advocate the provision of independent (and therefore impartial) career guidance delivered in the workplace by qualified specialists in career coaching, counselling or guidance? There would indeed be some advantages to the use of more specialist career professionals coming in from outside. They may be able to offer more impartial advice, although if from publicly-supported career services they would have national policy objectives and targets to promote. External specialists should be able to work in more depth with individuals in increasing their self-awareness and improving their career skills. However they also have some disadvantages. Most qualified career guidance professionals in the UK are not used to working in employing organisations; employers would be unlikely to fund them; and they lack the specific knowledge of career options and HR processes which others inside the organisation already have. We also need to be mindful that guidance professionals have no monopoly on the 'helping' skills of counselling and

coaching. HR managers and line managers are often highly skilled in supporting others and many now undertake formal training in coaching or counselling.

External providers of career services, seeking to sell their services to employers, do not always seem aware of the need to see career support in the workplace as part of the wider system of HR and management processes, not as something separate. External expertise in career guidance may be better used in enhancing the career skills of both managers and employees than in providing a formal 'career service' for all employees inside organisations. Career professionals may also have a potential role working in-depth with individuals who have lost direction or confidence and for whom impartiality and confidentiality of advice may be particularly important.

Implications for employers and public policy

In this paper we have explored a few of the issues concerned with improving career support in the workplace. In summary we would suggest some areas which deserve attention.

Five key areas which **employers** might usefully focus on are:

1. Understanding the *positive business outcomes* of career development, especially in growing scarce skills, deploying existing skills more flexibly, and motivating employees. Employers should develop clearer career strategies and policies for *all* employees, not just those seen as having 'high potential'.
2. Using their *core employment processes,* especially job design, job filling and training, to develop employees over time and not just in their current jobs.
3. Encouraging employees to have informal as well as formal *career discussions* with a range of people who can help them.
4. Connecting several stands of career support – what we might call a '*web' of career support.* This web should include at least one way of accessing career support which is additional to the support provided by the individual's line manager. The organisation should also appoint someone to co-ordinate career development policy and practical support.
5. *Skilling managers* to support careers and *skilling employees* to manage their careers.

Six key *national and public policy challenges*, for consideration by government and other national stakeholder groups are:

1. Providing career support for *employed adults* who are neither seen as 'high potential' (already prioritised by employers) nor low skill (the current priority of government). Who should pay for this career support?
2. Positioning public guidance services to focus on *work as well as learning*, and to widen the learning agenda *beyond qualifications* and formally assessed learning.

3. Delivering on the development of *career skills* in the population at all ages.
4. Clarifying whether public career services should *advise employers on workforce development* and, if so, with what intentions and in whose interests.
5. Clarifying whether public career services should offer career advice in the workplace for *employees* and, if so, how then to deal with the needs and possible concerns of the employer.
6. Consider which providers might be best placed *outside the employing organisation* to give career guidance to employed adults, including those in high skill and specialist labour markets and those working in small firms.

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