

## Careers Support in the Workplace

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Much of the public policy debate on career advice and guidance focuses - quite rightly - on young people and those facing unemployment or redundancy. Career guidance and advice in these situations often has a heavy emphasis on the acquisition of qualifications and on raising basic skills and personal confidence. It is often delivered by relatively specialised providers with public funding, augmented by those with less specialised training in careers work such as teachers and tutors or community workers.

There is, however, another whole world of career support for adults who are already in employment, and who wish to develop their careers further with their current employers or by moving from one employer to another. Career support for employed adults is fairly rarely supplied by specialists - it is an oddity of employment that your employer is only likely to send you for career guidance when they make you redundant! Career support in the workplace is often less about getting qualifications, and more about personal career choices and managing one's way through an organisational labour market.

So what makes for 'good' career support in the workplace?

### Getting the message straight - and positive

Employers in the UK - both public and private sector - have said pretty confusing things to their employees about careers over the last ten years or so. Employees still move from job to job within organisations, as well as between them, and most organisations aspire to fill the majority of their vacancies internally. Yet employees have been told that they cannot be promised a career, that career paths cannot be explained and that they have to manage their own careers. All of these things are true to some extent, but not nearly as much as organisations have said. Taking the last point - what we might call the issue of career ownership - employees certainly do need to take responsibility for their own careers. However, two other messages also need to be clearly heard.

The first is that there are many situations in which the organisation has a strong vested interest in taking the initiative with career development. Far from dying away in the age of the self-managed career, succession planning and high potential development programmes have been increasingly used. Why? Because it is downright negligent for an organisation to assume it can be passive in the development of higher level skills. This does not just apply at senior management levels. Good managers of any kind of team will be on the look out for those with potential to lead that team in future and will take steps to make sure that such individuals gain the necessary skills and encouragement to progress.

The second important message is that the organisation recognises that individuals who wish to develop their own careers need some kind of support from the organisation in doing so. At minimum this is about information on general types of job opportunity, skill needs and how to gain access

to job moves. In some organisations the idea of 'career partnership' offers rather stronger support, with the organisation and the individual attempting a serious dialogue about career options and actions which will be of mutual benefit.

The 1990s were a decade of rather negative messages to employees - so much so that 'career' is in some places a taboo word. I would argue that the 'negative nineties' served quite a useful function in telling employees to take more ownership of their careers, but allowed employers to back off from their part to a dysfunctional degree. A forthright positive message might be: *'We want to make the most of your ability during the time you stay with us, and we will be an active partner in developing your career to meet your aspirations and our needs.'*

### Processes for making career support a reality

Assuming we can brace ourselves for a more positive strategy, then what do we have to do to make it a reality?

If the organisation intends to plan proactively for some groups of employees, then it needs regular management processes to do this. Succession planning and development programmes are not inherently difficult but they do demand regular attention - for example to actually deliver the kinds of work experience identified for individuals. They are also bedevilled by lack of continuity as new HR Directors continuously stop, redesign and relaunch such schemes - much to the confusion of managers and the frustration of employees.

When it comes to the second strand of career development - supporting employees in developing their own careers -

the basic needs are just the same as those in other guidance settings. Employees need :

- a better view of themselves, especially relative to others. Skill reviews of the type often given in appraisal are not enough. Employees need to reflect on their own values and interests as well as abilities. They also need honest feedback on how the organisation perceives their potential as well as their current performance.
- to understand the range of types of work in the organisation and whether their own skills and experience would be considered relevant for these. They also need a broader understanding of how the organisation fits together and where it is headed in future. Employees are seldom given this 'tacit' understanding of the organisation - far removed from detailed lists of competencies required for each job.
- some support with thinking about their career plans. Some people seem to do this intuitively, but others don't have a clue how to start. Such support requires both some helpful frameworks (increasingly available on organisational intranets as self-study materials and exercises), but also someone to talk to - a problem we return to below.
- access to skill development. Employers are much better than in the past at training people for their current jobs, but not necessarily better at letting people develop for the jobs they aspire to.
- access to job moves. Organisations increasingly advertise internal vacancies but sometimes the job filling processes are so cumbersome that they effectively prevent anyone from getting a job they have not done before! Competence-based selection methods, if taken to extremes, can easily weed out all hope of career development.

## A range of people to talk to

Looking at these needs, they do not mostly require 'career interventions'. Arguably the most important process of all is the way jobs are filled - not generally seen as a career process at all, but rather the resourcing function of HR. Skill development requires a strong link between career development and training - still sometimes a separate function from HR (or personnel).

The information aspects of career support also do not necessarily require specific career activities. Understanding the organisation and the kind of work different people do is important for all employees in doing their current jobs well, as they increasingly need to work across boundaries and get information from other people. Information about your own skills and potential should come from those around you. NICEC research has shown that both information and help with personal planning is more likely to come from good informal support from a wide variety of people of at work than just from the boss or through formal processes.

When people need a real re-think more specialist career help may be very useful. This may come from people in the HR (or training and development) function who have had extra training in assessment, counselling and career guidance. In some companies, managers can refer employees to such people for a few in-depth sessions to re-focus their career plans. Some organisations use external people (the trendy term seems now to be 'career coaches'), although usually only for senior staff or those somehow 'at risk'. This rather oddly means that if you are offered a career coach you don't know whether you are seen as high potential or about to get the sack!

On the whole, however, employees need such specialist help quite rarely. Neither do they get in a fuss about issues of 'impartiality' - always taking advice with a pinch of salt and learning that career moves are usually political. The issues of trust and confidentiality are both complex and important in the workplace. Career discussions are often not confidential, but sensible employees take careful decisions about what they say to whom, and make sure that they only really confide in those they trust. Mentors - either formal or informal - can provide very personal and in-depth career support and do not need to be guidance specialists to be effective. They help with both self-knowledge and organisational understanding, and can advise on the politics and tactics of making a job move. They also often make their own networks available to the mentee.

The gradual recognition that career support is going to come from a lot of people in a lot of different ways brings us very belatedly to the idea of career education in the workplace. We really need all managers to feel comfortable giving career advice to others, and all employees to feel they know how to ask for the help they need and manage their own careers. The skills and understanding to manage your own career and support others in developing their careers should be a core element of training at work, just as it should be a core component of education in schools and colleges.

So there are some important differences between career support in the workplace and that provided in more public settings, but there are also some striking similarities. The kinds of information and support needed by individuals are similar as are the issues of who should provide such support - and especially questions about the place for specialists in career guidance. It is also the case that if career skills were really acquired in school and further/higher education then career development at work would be much improved. The two worlds of career support certainly have much to learn from each other.

## References

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