

Career Support Services for Employees

**The provision of career coaching or
career counselling in employing
organisations**

Summary of findings

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IES aims to help bring about sustainable improvements in employment policy and human resource management. IES achieves this by increasing the understanding and improving the practice of key decision makers in policy bodies and employing organisations.

The IES Research Networks

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Career Support Services for Employees

This paper presents the main findings of an IES Research Network study. The project has examined the various ways in which major employers offer a specialist career support service to their employees. Such services vary in terms of where they are positioned, what the service covers, the kinds of people delivering career support and the training available for this work.

By **'specialist career support'** we mean the opportunity for in-depth discussion of career issues with someone with significant skill. The terms 'career coaching' and 'career counselling' are those most often used to describe this area of work. The people giving support have a wide range of titles including career coaches, career counsellors, career advisers or career consultants. In the publicly funded careers services, the term 'career guidance' is used, and also the abbreviation 'IAG' (standing for information, advice and guidance) but these terms are rarely used in employing organisations.

Specialist career support services are quite fragile

Most employers do not provide a specialist career-support service for all their employees. They rely on line managers to give career support, sometimes with a degree of informal support from HR or learning and development professionals. The assumption is that most employees can manage their own careers with a bit of help from others, and they seldom need in-depth or professional support. There is still much work to be done in understanding the business, as well as personal, benefits of access to in-depth and professional career support in the workplace..

Mostly because career support is seen as 'nice to have', career services inside employing organisations are very fragile. The IES study found that some organisations were cutting back on career support just as others were putting in a service for the first time. Career services were often seen as easy targets for savings in HR spend.

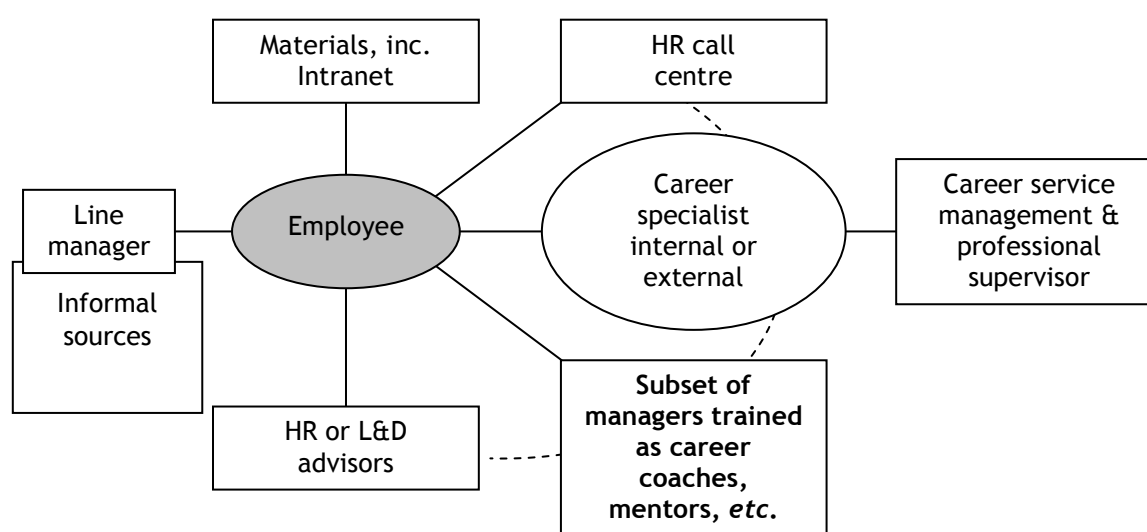
Many organisations do use outplacement providers for employees who are losing their jobs, but this does not seem to influence career support for employees who stay within the organisation.

Most large organisations offer personalised career support for those individuals in senior roles and in 'talent pools', but this does not necessarily lead to the same personalised attention for other employees. This in-depth support may or may not be given by someone with specialist expertise in careers work.

Specialist career support should be seen as part of a wider system

Where a specialist career service is present, it needs to be seen as part of a wider web of career-support provision (see Figure 1). Changes in the structure of HR, especially the move to HR shared services, are affecting how any specialist career service links with HR. The increased use of intranets for providing career information to employees is also part of this web of support.

Figure 1: Provision of career support



Source: IES, 2006

Several organisations in the study were reducing the number of full-time or specialist career consultants or career coaches while increasing the number of managers in the business that were trained up as volunteer career coaches.

The positioning of a career-support service is quite problematic. It often sits as part of a learning and development function, although this has the side effect of distancing it from an intimate understanding of the internal labour market.

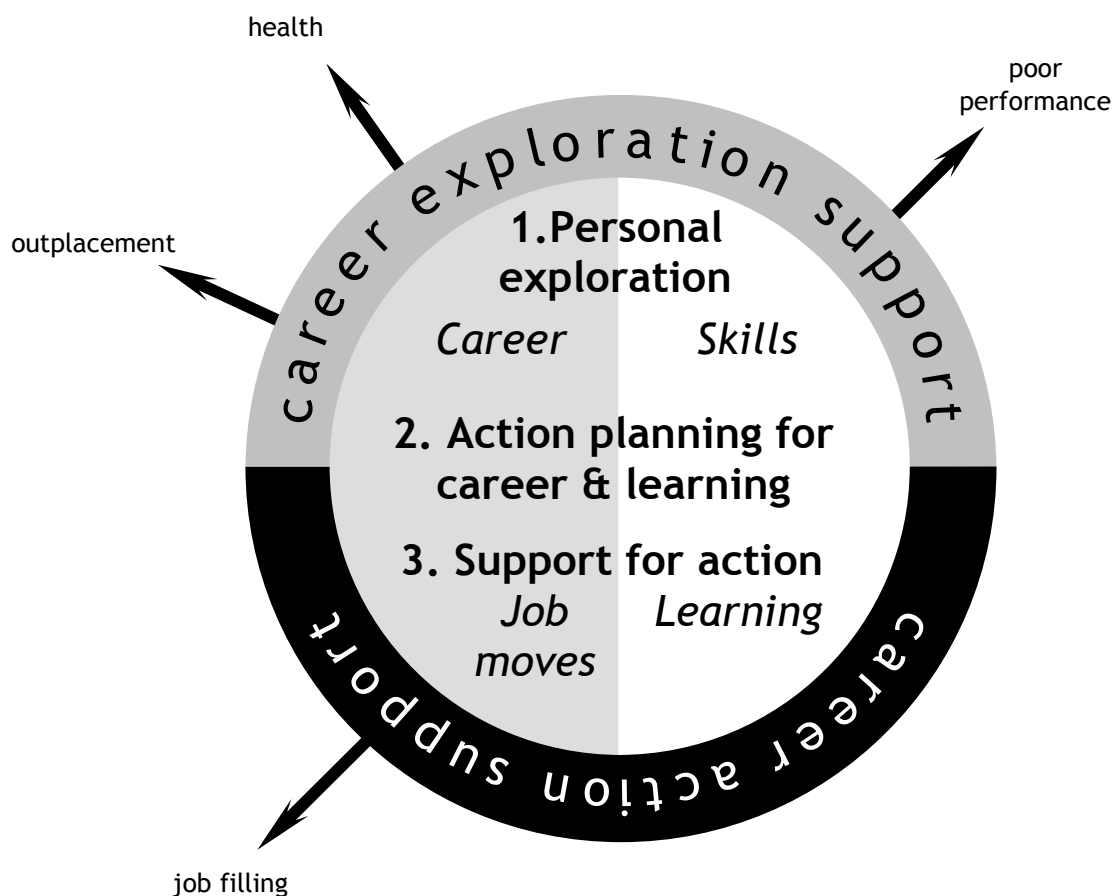
The development of coaching as an important mechanism for workplace learning is re-positioning some career services as 'career coaching', organisationally close to general or executive coaching. Some organisations have their career expertise in teams dealing with leadership development or (more unusually) in a deployment or resourcing function. Some career coaches or counsellors will sit as experts behind a generic HR call centre.

The positioning of career support inevitably affects its purpose and content and the kinds of people delivering it.

The content of career support

The different traditions in the UK of career counselling and, more recently, career coaching, lead to some differences in the nature of career support (see Figure 2). Some career support focuses on career direction, aspirations, and exploring career options. Other practitioners focus more on skill development. It is extremely important to see career development as wider than just skill development – the concept of career planning needs to address both work and learning issues.

Figure 2: The content of career support



Source: IES, 2006

There are also differences in the extent to which practitioners focus on self-exploration (the top of the circle in Figure 2), versus practical support for taking action about work or learning (the bottom of the circle). Action planning is nearly always present in some form or other (the middle of the circle).

It is also important to define what will lie outside the scope of an organisational career support service. As shown on Figure 2, employees should be referred elsewhere for outplacement, health and stress counselling and for dealing with poor performance. Confusing any of these with career support will make employees feel it is only a service

for people with personal or work problems – not the right message. Career support should not be confused with ‘getting someone a job’. Organisations have separate processes by which jobs are filled and career moves made.

Practical management issues

Providing an internal career service raises a number of practical challenges including:

- processes for referral into the service, and referral out of those who need a different kind of help
- the pattern of length and number of sessions offered
- the geographical location of career specialists and combining face-to-face with telephone or ICT support
- the use of internal versus external career coaches/consultants
- the use of other activities before, during or after one-to-one support *eg* career workshops, self-help materials
- follow up of clients and evaluation of the service
- confidentiality, especially where the career specialist is also an employee
- CPD and supervision of those giving career support, and management of the service

Background and training for career specialists

Career support specialists in the UK come from a wide variety of backgrounds as shown in Figure 3. There is no widely accepted model for training and accrediting career specialists (or even highly trained volunteers) in employing organisations. The training of public sector careers advisers does not equip them fully for the career issues of adults in employment or for working with employers. Counsellors and coaches have generic helping skills but may need to increase their understanding of career-specific issues, theories and tools. HR and training professionals may need to deepen both their career understanding and their coaching/counselling skills.

Issues employers need to consider

Some of the issues arising from this project are the need to:

- better understand the added value of having a career service for employees over and above the normal model of line manager plus some help from HR

Figure 3: Professional backgrounds of career counsellors and career coaches



Source: IES, 2006

- consider the differences between 'coaching' and 'counselling' approaches to career support and how best to combine the strengths of different traditions of career support in the UK
- consider how best to use a mix of people with a specialist training in career support and well trained volunteers, and how both of these groups can augment what many line managers could deliver if better trained, encouraged and supported.

Details of the research undertaken

The project collected information in a number of ways. Fifteen major employing organisations sent written responses to an email survey and an additional nine case study organisations participated through in-depth discussions. The case study organisations were chosen because they offered internal career support of a specialist kind. Twenty seven interviews were conducted with employers, representatives from public career services, professional bodies, training providers for career professionals in higher education and in the private sector, practising career coaches and occupational psychologists.