



Paper

Career development in organisations to navigate changes in work and skills

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This article examines the challenges of career development for employees and their employing organisations against the backdrop of pre-existing trends and changes, amplified by the business and employment disruption of the pandemic. It questions whether long-standing approaches to career development in organisations are adequate and offers some suggestions for what employers could be doing now to position their businesses and workforces better for the future.

Public and private career issues

Career change is a mainstream public issue in the UK in the early months of 2021. The focus of public employment policy has necessarily been on financial support to keep jobs and to support people who have lost their livelihoods or are at risk of doing so. It is now turning to skills. Some people will be looking to find work in a different sector or occupation from their previous experience, either out of choice or necessity. However, significant career change is more complex than the ill-judged advertising poster suggesting that a ballet dancer should re-train in cyber security. The White Paper on *Skills for Jobs* (Department for Education, 2021) advocates lifelong learning and proposes changes in the education and training system; but it fails to build-in significant provision of career guidance to help individuals make better informed decisions about their learning and work. Without such career development support, individuals choosing educational courses are being asked to take huge risks with their own investment of time, effort and money.

Recent reports from the OECD (2021) and CEDEFOP (2020) are much clearer on the need to integrate policies for employment, career guidance, education and training and social inclusion. They also highlight the development of career management skills in adults as part of career guidance. These are the skills we all need to manage our own career development and navigate our working lives: to understand ourselves, our situation and the labour market; to identify realistic work options; and to access work and learning opportunities. This is considerably more than a quick session on how to write a CV.

Careers are also on the personal and family agenda for many people in the UK who are in work but have experienced an unsettling year. Some workers are overstretched, exhausted or feel unsafe in their workplaces. Others may have been working less, for example on furlough, and have had time to think. For those working from home, the lack of commuting may be a treat, but endless hours of online meetings with colleagues, customers or service users – and maybe home schooling too - are hardly conducive to job satisfaction or mental and physical health. No surprise then that private practitioners in career guidance are already seeing more clients who are wondering why they do what they do, whether they want to go on doing it and what changes they might wish to make to the content of their work or the patterns of their working lives when this becomes possible. For some, these thoughts and feelings may subside when working life returns to something like normal. But employers are taking a big risk if they assume that everyone simply wants to go back to what they were doing before. As always, employees looking for some change in their work may find it easier to go elsewhere than to get their employers to listen to their ideas and meet them half-way.

Why are careers of growing interest to employers?

It is important to recognise that the pandemic and its career consequences, come on top of a set of drivers which were already pushing career development up the corporate agenda.

Integrating talent management and career development

'Talent management' created a flurry of excitement in the early 2000s, stimulated by McKinsey's warnings of the *War for Talent* at senior leadership levels (Chambers et al, 1998). The word 'talent' caught and held the attention of business leaders and the HR profession, although it has also proved confusing and sometimes divisive. 'Talent management' in its early days was largely a rebranding and relaunching of succession management and leadership development, often including individualised career attention and facilitated career moves for so-called 'high potential' employees. Although some of the early talent management language and practices were crude, its high profile did at least put career development back on the agenda, albeit for small numbers of employees.

More recently, talent management ideas and activities have been applied to both larger workforce groups (most often with professional level skills) and specific job roles (at any level), that are critical to business performance and difficult to resource by external recruitment. Organisations reduce their resourcing risks by developing appropriate 'talent pipelines' of people for these types of work (Hirsh and Tyler, 2017).

The implementation of talent management is essentially about integrating recruitment, employee development and deployment to meet evolving business needs for the future workforce on relevant timeframes. It is therefore about how individuals join an organisation, move around inside it and learn from the different experiences they have. In turn, these experiences equip those individuals to do more complex or varied work tasks. This widely accepted view of organisational talent management is precisely the mirror image of career development from the individual's perspective: how an individual plans and navigates their work and learning experiences over time in response to their own changing preferences and available opportunities.

As one IES client said to us *"I knocked on the door of talent management and found myself in the room of career development."*

Talent management also reminds us that careers are not just about hierarchical progression or even necessarily about actual job moves. Many people can spend decades in the same job, with the same job title in the same place, while experiencing enormous changes in their work and skills. Think about a GP, a classroom teacher, a weather forecaster, a warehouse worker or a garage mechanic.

Organisations that have taken talent management on board as a mindset, not just a set of procedures, start to look for win-win outcomes where the resourcing needs of the business meet the career interests of individuals (Hirsh and Tyler, 2017).

Engagement, inclusion and demography

Attention to employee engagement over the past ten years, and the regular use of employee attitude surveys, has highlighted career development both as a factor influencing engagement and often an area of employee dissatisfaction. Concern about employee engagement may have driven the trend for line managers, who we know have the biggest impact on engagement, to be required to have 'career conversations' with their staff.

Diversity and inclusion have become reputational issues for organisations, transcending earlier arguments about the business case for diversity. Employers are starting to address the inter-sectional impacts of gender, race, disability and social background on access to learning and work – in other words, careers. The challenge of inclusion shines a spotlight on the opportunities for all staff to develop and use their potential. The focus of talent management has widened in response to this pressure (Hirsh and Tyler, 2017).

The UK's shifting demography and ageing workforce have been of growing concern in recent years, especially with fears of skill shortages in the run up to Brexit. Managing longer working lives will remain a pressure, probably made more acute by the negative impact of the pandemic on the employment of older workers (OECD, 2020; Edwards et al, 2021). Some employers, like Aviva, have adopted the idea of a mid-career review or 'Mid-Life MOT' for older employees to help them remain employable as working lives get longer. Such reviews typically combine career workshops with health and financial advice, including pensions.

At the other end of the age spectrum many employers are delivering career activities in schools and colleges (CEC, 2020) and in universities, aiming to improve longer-term skill supply and give career support to less advantaged students. Young people's education and employment is suffering badly during the pandemic. This will affect their working lives, and therefore also their future employers, both in the short-term and for years to come.

Navigating changing work and skill needs

Managing organisational change looks like becoming the biggest driver for career development inside organisations as well as in the wider labour market. Employers have been talking about changing skill needs over recent years, often related to both general and industry-specific uses of digital technologies. The Corporate Research Forum (CRF, 2020) found that HR professionals want to align career development more strongly with changing skill needs. But the future skills debate often feels rather abstract until the moment comes when employers really change the jobs they have.

The pandemic has made work and skill change rapid and real as many businesses have had to respond to several rounds of unpredictable change in their markets, products and supply chains. Jobs have been gained in some kinds of work and lost in others, for example in huge shifts to online retail, especially food delivery. Working from home has also redesigned jobs, but often implicitly. Think for example of the massive switch to online educational provision by teachers and lecturers. Some businesses have gone

under and many will be fighting for survival over the coming year. But even organisations not under threat seem likely to change their business and workforce plans in response to the difficulties and opportunities presented by the pandemic, but also by Brexit and other major economic and political shifts, alongside their options for technological change. All this will make the changing work and skills driver for career development a good deal more pressing over the next year or two.

It is hardly surprising then that PwC (2020) found that three quarters of CEOs were concerned about skills. At the same time, over three quarters of employees were willing to upskill to become more employable, but only one in three felt they had been given the opportunity to gain transferable and digital skills.

Given the uncertainty of change, organisations have also been looking to increase the adaptability, flexibility, agility and resilience of the workforce. The common assumption is that individuals with a wider range of work experience, learning and career transitions may be more willing and able to adapt to change. However, organisations are unclear about how they expect employees to access such wider work experiences. Just exhorting individuals to 'be' more flexible or resilient does not make this happen. As we see below, current HR processes make it difficult for individuals to move into jobs that are significantly different from what they have done before.

The rhetoric of 'career partnership'

Career development, for all the reasons given above, does seem to be back on the corporate agenda. But what then is the role of the employer in careers?

Mackenzie Davey (2020) highlights the complex interactions between the agency of employees in their own careers, the HR processes designed and operated by the organisation which facilitate or constrain the development of those careers and the social context in which careers take place.

Individuals are exhorted to take ownership of their own careers, but of course the organisation holds most of the power as it decides how to organise and resource its work, knows about forthcoming opportunities and controls access to training and selection into jobs and projects.

In a recent survey of employers by the Corporate Research Forum (CRF, 2020), a clear majority of HR respondents said their organisations were becoming more active in supporting career development for all staff, some were becoming more active for selected workforce groups, and only a tiny proportion becoming less active in career development overall. But less than half the sample communicated a clear statement on career development to all staff. Responsibility for career development was often unclear both at professional and leadership levels in HR.

The CRF respondents were more likely to see career development as a partnership between the organisation and the employee than just the responsibility of the employee. But this was the case nearly twenty years ago in a similar survey by CIPD (2003). At that time 80% or more of the CIPD respondents saw career development as 'individually owned', but also that 'a partnership approach is essential' and that 'employees need

advice, support and training.’ So, the idea of a career development partnership between the employer and employee is not new at all.

Current career development practices

Practice is of course what counts, so how is this idea of career partnership reflected in relevant and effective career development activities in organisations? In practice, most employees get quite limited support for career development, relying on four main mechanisms:

- Online information about jobs and skills is quite often provided in the form of job descriptions or competency frameworks. Although potentially useful, this information can be complicated and fragmented. Employers rarely explain the broad types of career which would help employees make sense of detailed, job-specific information. Very few employers communicate relevant information on how changing business needs will be affecting skill requirements or work opportunities.
- Learning and development is usually well-established, but normally focused on the skills employees need for their work today, not for the future. Employers sometimes provide access to internal or external libraries of e-learning materials. This is potentially empowering but again, without the big picture narrative, employees may not know what they could aim for in career terms and therefore steer their use of learning resources.
- Many organisations now expect individuals and their line managers to have ‘career conversations.’ This can be a useful place for the employee to start, but line managers, especially at junior levels, are not the best sources of career information or advice (Hirsh, 2018). They often know little more about work or learning opportunities than the individual can already see for themselves. They may also lack the skills and confidence to have genuinely open and exploratory career conversations. Only about half the CRF (2020) survey participants offered managers training for their role in career development, and only a small minority made this training mandatory. This was no better than in the CIPD 2003 research.
- Employees access job moves mostly via open internal advertisement of vacancies, followed by selection against a job description. This process appears fair, but it is unlikely to deploy an individual to where the business needs them most or where they will best develop their career and enjoy their work. It is difficult for individuals to know which vacancies to identify or apply for. Employees who show their flexibility by applying for unusual career moves are very unlikely to be selected under this process, which favours candidates who have done all the relevant work tasks before.

Employers do not generally see these processes as effective ways to manage careers (CRF, 2020), acknowledging the lack of line management skill to support staff, insufficient focus on future skills and a lack of understanding of the aspirations of employees. But they have not essentially changed this model for twenty years. It seems ironic that the only time most employees get serious career support is when they are made redundant and outplacement consultants are brought in.

It is striking that when organisations focus on the career development of much smaller populations of current or potential senior leaders, they do things very differently. Career

moves managed by the organisation are common for leaders and high potential employees, who are also far more likely than other employees to get career support from a professional career counsellor or coach (CRF, 2020). They also often have access to confidential conversations with senior HR people who know a lot about what is going on in the organisation, including politically. This level of personalised career attention obviously cannot be delivered to large numbers of employees. But there are ways of delivering information, advice and access to experiential learning to all employees using the existing resources of the organisation.

Strengthening career development

We have had a range of affordable and scalable ways of improving career development for the wider workforce since the 1990s. The IPD (now CIPD) published a comprehensive guide to career management interventions in 1998 and Yarnall (2007) illustrated their use. The list below reflects some well-developed organisational approaches which, especially used in combination, would greatly help employees prepare for the future.

Cost effective and scalable ways of strengthening career development include:

- Clear communication to all staff of the organisation's career development strategy, the kinds of careers on offer in the organisation, the kinds of skills which will be in growing demand, both generally and for specific types of job, and where to get further support.
- Training all line managers in basic career coaching as part of mainstream management development. Managers are quite often introduced to coaching for performance, which could easily be extended to practical training in effective career conversations.
- Access to someone additional to the line manager to talk about career options and actions. Varied models for this include formal or informal mentors; L&D or HR professionals; and trained volunteer career coaches in different areas of the organisation. Internal networking across the organisation can be actively encouraged through communities of practice and internal social media applications.
- Career workshops or career courses for groups of employees – often now facilitated online – can be combined with self-help career planning tools. Workshops address short term issues but also develop long term career management skills. They extend individuals' networks because they are a group activity.
- Increased access to developmental work experiences - the chance to do different work tasks. Experiences can be made available through projects within or across teams, job enrichment, job swaps, job rotation and work shadowing.
- Integrating individual career support through these kinds of activities with work re-design, re-deployment and re-skilling in the management of major organisational change.

Many organisations do some of these things from time to time, but very few use them in a strategic and sustained way. Organisations would be well advised to investigate with managers and staff which of these kinds of activities will be most relevant to their situation. Effective strategies consist of an integrated set of selected activities piloted, implemented and continuously adjusted over several years.

Clarifying accountability

Individuals need to develop their own careers, but they need support to do this inside organisations. Much of that support will come from business leaders and managers at all levels acting as a network of support, not just as separate individuals. Just like talent management, the HR function (including L&D and OD) does not 'own' career development but does need to show leadership to facilitate strategy development and co-ordinate some activities.

Progress in career development is impeded by a lack of clarity about where it sits in the HR profession and in HR functions. The CIPD map of the HR profession does not include career development as an area of specialist knowledge, nor is it explicitly included in talent management or learning and development. No wonder then that HR professionals in the UK are largely unfamiliar with career theory, career development interventions and may have never been trained in career coaching or career counselling skills.

It is also unclear where accountability for career development sits in a modern HR function. If organisations really intend to become more active partners in career development, it seems sensible to have someone at a professional level in HR with clear co-ordinating responsibility for career development across the workforce. Career development is often seen as part of learning and development, but this risks seeing it just as skill acquisition, without the necessary strong links to workforce planning, resourcing and deployment. Talent management posts or teams are becoming more common in HR. Some organisations are already positioning career development for the whole workforce there, complementing existing talent management responsibilities for specific groups such as senior leaders and early career trainees.

Time to make a start

This article has shown why career development in organisations matters in a changing world, not just to employees but to businesses. It seems likely that we are in for a period of heightened business change. The pandemic has added risks and opportunities to an already complex change agenda, both in business terms and employment strategies. Changes will affect work, skills and therefore careers.

The pandemic has shown us that many employees are flexible and adaptable and capable of so much more than their employers previously thought. It is in everyone's interest for people to be able to navigate their working lives in a well-informed and confident way. But inside organisations, just as with public policy, addressing changes in work and skills just with education and training solutions is not enough. Skill development

alone will not help employees understand their possible work futures, identify actions they need to take or give them access to the new work experiences which will get them from where they are today to where they could be in a few years' time.

We have explored why current practices in organisations do not add up to an effective career development 'partnership', even though that is what many employers say they are working towards. We have suggested a range of activities which can strengthen career development for many employees. Someone in HR needs to be accountable for using such approaches strategically, and co-ordinating activities with colleagues in the function and with managers and employees across the business.

When we look back on 2021, will it be the year when the wheels of effective career development finally started turning? Will employees feel supported as they navigate the changing work landscape inside their organisations? Or will they still feel in the dark, wondering what the future might hold and maybe looking around for a better place to work?

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