

Secondments: A review of current research

A background paper for IES Research Network Members

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Secondments: A review of current research

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to try to bring together the existing literature on secondments, so that the process can be accurately defined, its usage assessed, and lessons learnt can be drawn together. What is clear is that the subject is, so far, largely ignored by the academic research community and so the information available is drawn primarily from case study examples.

Definitions

The term 'secondment' originally applied to the temporary transfer of a member of staff from one department to another, within the same organisation. The concept now includes transfer between organisations as well, be it private, public or voluntary (CIPD, 2003a). According to Tuffrey (1997) the loan period is for a fixed period of time and for a specific role. The organisation seconding the employee retains remuneration of them, including all existing benefits.

The Cabinet Office (2003) uses secondments as part of their Interchange programme, which seeks to exchange skills and knowledge across the sectors. The Cabinet Office definition of a secondment still has the notion of loaning an employee to another department or organisation but imposes a time limit, from three months to rarely more than three years. Anything less than three months would be described as an attachment, which due to the shorter period of time tends to be project specific rather than role specific.

One of the most informative pieces of work on secondments (IDS, 2001), which is a collection of case studies, claims that longer-term secondments tend to allow the secondee to become familiar with the culture of the host organisation. This study reports that the Cabinet Office views a secondment of between nine months and a year to be the optimum length of time to realise the full skill transfer benefits. However, it is also recognised that shorter-term secondments are becoming increasingly popular due to the lower cost and shorter time without key staff.

Definition of a practice is inextricably linked to the purpose of that practice. McKenzie (2003) presents a typology of secondments according to purpose:

- **Developmental secondment.** This form of secondment is focussed on personal development for the secondee that is designed to be brought back into the organisation, as opposed to the other variants below. The process should also involve a two-way skill transfer.
- **Strategic secondment.** This is usually a short-term secondment, from private to public or voluntary sectors, where the recipient organisation has a shortfall in specific skill areas.
- **Conflict resolution support.** This is the use of a secondment to diffuse a problem between existing staff members. It is described as a low-cost alternative to litigation or a tribunal case.
- **'Golden Handcuff'.** This type of secondment is used, instead of the more typical financial incentive, to keep key people in the organisation. It can also be used to keep hold of key skills during a downturn, ending when business picks up once more, so this method can also be seen as an alternative to redundancy.
- **Transitional secondment.** This variety of secondment can be used during downsizing, so that an individual may gain additional knowledge skills and abilities so that the impact of redundancy is lessened. In terms of the transitional model, secondments often open up the possibility of a more permanent job move. This happens not only in the case of exit, but also as a result of internal secondments.

There is variation not only in the way secondments are defined but also in the manner in which they are regarded. Secondments have now become a management development tool for managers of all levels, and not just a method of sidelining a senior manager near retirement (Carrington, 2001), which leads as to the question of who is involved in secondments and what is the scale of the undertaking.

Usage

Much of the research into secondments has been of a descriptive, case study nature and it has been difficult to find surveys that record its level of usage within UK organisations. For a management development tool, which has matured from infancy, this is somewhat surprising. However, a recent survey (CIPD, 2003b) entitled: '*Managing employee careers*' has picked up on this theme and provides some quantitative information about secondments.

The survey sample comprised 5,000 CIPD members with interest in the area of career management, and a response rate of 15 per cent was achieved. The survey was followed up with telephone interviews with some of the respondents.

The survey drew a comparison between external secondments and internal secondments, the latter of which was classified with project assignments and work shadowing for the purpose of the survey. Internal secondments/project assignments/work shadowing are the fifth most commonly used practice for career management, with 77 per cent of respondents reporting these methods as used in their organisation. This compares to 40 per cent of respondents confirming that their organisations used external secondments. Whilst many organisations report that there is an altruistic element to using secondment schemes, these figures could imply that talent sharing to develop the secondee is most popular when the 'talent' can be shared internally. The survey not only sought information about the usage of such schemes, but also gained information about what level of employee was taking part and how successful the secondments were. Comparing internal to external secondments, the former were thought effective or very effective by 78 per cent of the respondents, whereas this figure was only 67 per cent for the latter. The results also suggest that external secondments are the preserve of senior management and professional staff, whereas internal secondments are open to middle and junior managers, and graduates as well.

The survey also discovered that some career management practices were often used in connection with other types, forming clusters of practices depending on the specific purpose of the career management. For example, use of secondments by an organisation was often accompanied by managed career break schemes, and formal mentoring, with the purpose of 'developing the elite' or 'gaining new experiences or skills'. It was also found that the more practices were offered by the organisation under each cluster, the more effective they were perceived to be in delivering the objective.

Some other information on the volume of secondments comes from the Civil Service Interchange. They are responsible for promoting and encouraging an increase in the exchange of personnel and good practice between the Civil Service and other sectors of the economy, this is achieved, as mentioned above, by means of secondments, attachments and other methods. They are in the process of compiling current statistics but they normally have 4,000 participants per annum taking part in the schemes (personal correspondence, 2003).

The nursing profession seems to be a favoured setting for the use of secondments (Bond, 2002; Critchley, 2002), the latter author offering nine reasons why secondments should be utilised, these points summarise why secondments are used:

- **Security.** Staff have the security of the promise of returning to their original job but also the opportunity to try something different.
- **Enablement.** Personal development can be enabled in environments which subject the secondee to novel conditions, requiring additional skills.
- **Career enhancement.** Developing new skills will make the secondee more attractive for promotion.
- **Opportunity.** New doors are opened to the secondee by being exposed to different experiences, such as leadership or management opportunities.
- **Networking.** Exposure to other staff groups also increases their available networks, which is a useful resource for the individual and in turn the organisation.
- **Diversity.** The opportunity to work with different colleagues and clients can offer a wealth of experience, which can enrich personal development.
- **Motivation.** Staff who have been in post for a long time can be rejuvenated by the opportunity to try something new and refreshing.
- **Education.** A secondment can expose the individual to new ways of working, different cultures and leadership styles. This new knowledge can then be transferred back into the host department.
- **Nurture.** Secondment, especially accompanied by mentoring with clear objectives, can be a nurturing experience. The change of environment and to work differently might enable the employee to fulfil their potential.

The benefits and possible pitfalls of using secondments

Any secondment process, regardless of length of time, sector of operation, or purpose of secondment, involves three parties: the secondee, the secondee's organisation, and the host organisation. Advantages and disadvantages will thus be considered from these three perspectives.

The secondee

Recent research conducted by the Whitehall & Industry Group (WIG, 2002), utilising focus groups and interviews with secondees and organisations, sheds light on benefits as well as challenges of the secondment process. Personal benefits to the individual included personal development, a way of progressing a career, the opportunity to change direction, time for contemplation and re-evaluation of existing skills and abilities, and finally a way of seeing that the grass is not necessarily greener. Individuals did

however have concerns about missing out on an appraisal and an opportunity for a bonus whilst away. There was also a certain insecurity about returning to the original organisation. These problems, however, can be ameliorated by brokerage of the secondment and regular contact with the home organisation during the secondment.

Other evidence corroborates the personal development opportunity of the secondment. The secondee has the opportunity for greater personal development than in the home workplace, and to test skills outside of the workplace (CIPD, 2003b). These particular advantages were in connection with secondments to the voluntary sector, which might suggest that the voluntary sector is an environment where skills may be tested in a less financially damaging environment. The same publication also maintains that internal secondments are especially useful to employees now that hierarchies are that much flatter, therefore providing more limited development opportunity. An internal secondment can give the employee the necessary personal development without having to change jobs or locations.

Research has also found that individuals involved in community involvement (including secondments), as compared to more traditional development methods (such as classroom based activities), had greater increases in competency (Tuffrey, 1997). These competencies were measured both before and after the secondment, using a self-report questionnaire, and then the results were corroborated by a line manager.

The case studies mentioned earlier (IDS, 2001) provide useful information about secondments in three different circumstances. The organisations involved were the Cabinet Office, Conoco, and the John Lewis Partnership. The Cabinet Office case study was concerned with the Interchange scheme, and whilst it was reported that feedback has been positive and secondees have a 'noticeable rise in self-confidence', it was admitted that adequate evaluation systems were not yet in place. The success of the secondments is currently determined only through the appraisal process, but steps are being taken to extend this. In the case of Conoco, a gas and oil company, the feedback thus far has been positive and the company continues to pursue the scheme. The benefits arising from this short-term secondment to government apparently arise from an increase in understanding of the interplay between government and the oil and gas industry, as the industry is heavily regulated. Finally, the John Lewis scheme was set up with the purpose of supporting charities by offering skills for free. Whilst it was understood that positive outcomes were likely for staff, this was not measured as it was not the scheme's aim.

Finally, the related concept 'job swaps', can serve to aid retention of employees, by improving quality of working life. Job swaps occur in an intra-organisational manner and can be on a

temporary or permanent basis. Job swapping was launched at the Duke Power Company (Pasternak, 1993) in a bid to revitalise a departments with 'fresh blood' when no new openings existed, and also to boost the morale of the workforce. In one example of a swap, two employees exchanged jobs so that they could work at locations nearer their homes in order to reduce commuting time.

The secondee's home organisation and the host organisation

Many of the benefits and pitfalls are similar for both the host and home organisation and for this reason they are discussed together below. These issues also apply in the case of the internal secondment, where the home organisation becomes the home department and the host organisation the host department.

The secondee's organisation will benefit from the personal development improvements already detailed above. The benefits to the host organisation can be similar to that of the secondee's organisation, so these will also be highlighted here. This section will focus on the more strategic aspects of secondment and how secondments should be run by the organisation to prevent pitfalls.

Research has examined the current Civil Service Interchange scheme (WIG, 2002) revealing what benefits the host and home organisation currently think are being derived and how the scheme could be improved. Organisations mentioned that current benefits included building relations with other organisations, introducing a 'new way of doing things', and gaining skills for the organisation, addressing either staff shortages or even excesses. The major criticism by government departments and private companies alike was the unsystematic approach to evaluating the process. Evaluation of training has proved hard enough, but in the case of secondment there are two organisations to consider. A secondment evaluated as successful for the host organisation might not be successful for the home organisation involved. There is clearly need for a process to evaluate secondments from all perspectives. There is a general feeling that secondments are 'a good thing' but most evidence is anecdotal. Organisations were also asked what would the ideal secondment would look like. The main point arising is that secondments should be more strategic in nature, for both the individual and the organisation. The organisation and the individual should be matched in terms of a shared goal and this goal should be linked to the secondee's career plan and the organisation's business objectives. There was a also a call for the secondment process to be better managed and evaluated. Finally, both organisations would like the process to be cost neutral.

One of the benefits often mentioned is that the individual is exposed to working in a different organisational culture. Work undertaken by Smith (2001) examined whether a cultural change

could occur as a result of secondments. The research occurred within the context of the Scottish Office, with employees being sent to the EC on secondment. It was found that the benefits arising were more in the domain of an increased understanding or 'thinking European' rather than any deeper, ethos-based type of change. Also these benefits seemed to be limited to the person and not to their co-workers, *ie* there was limited organisational learning.

Other authors have noted that sending employees on secondments can bring skills into the organisation that otherwise would not have been available. Not only does secondment allow the learning of new skills but also exposes the employee to the idea that there are skills in which they are deficient. A main difference between training and secondment is that an employee about to embark on some training is already aware that they need to develop a specific skill set, whereas the secondment provides the opportunity to be exposed to the 'way other organisations operate'.

Recent work conducted by IES (Kettley and Hirsh, 2000) on learning in cross-functional teams reveals a similar idea. The concept of a cross-functional team is analogous to an internal secondment, as the secondee or team member is working with people from outside their department. In this way they are exposed to new skills, perspectives and cultures. The IES study sought to discover what individuals actually learnt from being in cross-functional teams. One of the findings was that some employees approached the experience with little or no learning intent. However, the research showed that learning occurred in three domains, about the self, the organisation, and other specialisms. Of these three, the learning about self was found to be the most reported. Learning about self covers 'soft skills' such as interactive and communication skills, conflict resolution and self-awareness.

Reade (2002) reports on a secondment of an HR manager from a medium sized hotel business to the Marriott group. On the secondee's return, policies were introduced to forge better links with Further Education Colleges, to aid resourcing of the organisation, to improve career development for chefs, and to introduce staff focus groups, like quality circles or kaizen teams, to generate ideas for the business.

Another case study example demonstrates how secondments can bring new skills into an organisation (Duff and Muktersingh, 2000) and shows that these skills can lead to real business advantage. This secondment, which was organised and part-funded by the DTI's International Secondments Service, placed an employee from a UK ship repair company with a Norwegian company that possessed specialist knowledge unobtained in the UK. The UK company is now the only company in the UK that

can repair a certain sort of ship propeller, which should then materialise into business benefit.

A further resource worth consulting when developing your secondment scheme is a book by Nicholson (1988), which examines work-role transitions. This publication should be of interest to those who are interested in the practical set-up issues of secondments, such as orientation and expectation setting.

Summary

This review has developed definitions of secondment, outlined the usage of the practice, and discussed the possible benefits and pitfalls. A summary of possible benefits by party is presented below (Table 1).

What is clear from reviewing the literature is that much of the evidence is anecdotal or from case study reports. This has been helpful in terms of mapping out the area in a descriptive manner and pointing to areas of future research, but there are questions still unanswered. To conclude this review some of these questions are raised below:

- **Expectations.** How can the expectations of the individual and the organisations be best managed to produce the best value from the secondment?
- **Secondment administration.** What practical issues do organisations need to take into account for smooth running of secondments (pay, benefits, etc.)?
- **Wider organisational learning.** How can the organisation maximise the benefits from the secondment process? Are there mechanisms available so that the secondee's new skills can be transferred to other employees?

Table 1: Summary of benefits to the three parties involved in secondment

Secondee	Secondee's Organisation	Host Organisation
Exposure to new development opportunities.	Secondee can try new skills without damaging business in their own organisation	Free or cost neutral expertise
Exposure to new knowledge and skills of which they were not previously aware. This cannot be addressed through specific training.	Transferral of skills from returning secondee.	New skills brought into the organisation, which can be learnt by existing members.
Creates a network of professionals working in the same field.	Building relations with other organisations	Building relations with other organisations
Accelerated career path	Retention mechanism, which could re-engage an employee.	Solution to staff shortages

Source: IES

- **Re-entry.** How do we best reassure the secondees that their position will still be available on their return? How do we reintroduce the employee to the organisation? If they have learnt new skills they will probably want to make use of them in their role. To 'upskill' an employee and not allow them to make use of their new skills is likely to be a de-motivating experience.

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