

organizations & managers must reassess how they view **CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

BY WENDY TAN SIEW INN AND BEVERLY CROWELL

With the speed of change sweeping through business environments, organizations increasingly need to adopt a more flexible mindset that empowers employees for career self-management. If accelerating skill development and building the talent pipeline is important, then this new mindset is critical as well.

According to Career Systems International, career growth and learning and development are among the top engagement and retention factors for employees today. Organizations are catching on to this fact and are tailoring their employee value proposition to say, “Join us because we will help you realize your potential.” But is there real commitment behind this statement?



podcast

Regardless of whether your company's program is traditional or flexible, it must be transparent and supportive.



All too often, the recruiting message doesn't match the mindset of managers responsible for implementing it inside organizations. In the halls and in conversations with fellow managers, it's not uncommon to hear these types of comments:

- “We don't want employees to reflect too much about their careers, in case they want to leave.”
- “Let sleeping dogs lie; don't put thoughts about career development in their head.”
- “Why open a can of worms? What if everyone wants a different role after they have thought about their career?”
- “We can't have the whole organization wanting to change roles.”
- “We need to check the career aspirations of the people to see if they have got it right.”

These comments might reflect:

- the organization's lack of faith that people will think of leaving if they reflect on their careers
- an assumption that people don't already think of career development
- a lack of trust and confidence that we will be able to find viable win-win options for the staff and organization
- an assumption that we know what's best for their career development
- an anxiety to keep the status quo because it's predictable and controllable.

These assumptions are potentially counter-productive because they are based on the industrial model of organizing work, where work is predictable and easily managed by

breaking it down to small parts.

However, with the twin forces of globalization and technology, the frequency, nature, and scale of change has increased tremendously. This forces organizations to be agile and adapt quickly. New skills and know-how are constantly emerging. The top 10 jobs

in demand now, such as cloud services specialist, data scientist, and digital marketing specialist, did not even exist a decade ago.

Rather than operate based on the same assumptions from the past, perhaps it is

worthwhile to examine some assumptions, and consider the organization's stand on career development beyond its recruitment pitch.

Traditional vs. flexible mindsets

What are the different mindsets of organizations toward career development? For some, it's quite traditional. For others, the shift is to a more flexible view of what “career” means today (see table on page 45).

These two organizational mindsets serve different contexts. The traditional mindset is suitable when there are minimal changes in the operating environment that compels work to be done differently. The career ladder and graduating competencies remain stable and apt. In addition, there could be operational constraints or a predetermined set of experiences required for bigger subsequent roles that do not give people an option to choose a posting. This is a fixed environment.

On the other hand, the flexible mindset works better for contexts where the world is changing faster than we can plan, and control for that organic evolution becomes more efficient. In addition, human resources typically is too thinly resourced to do the heavy lifting in planning every individual's postings. This is an evolving environment.

Case study

In one open and transparent Fortune 500 company, employees are expected to drive their own careers. However, a few years ago, some high-quality talent left the company. Although it was not a big percentage of the workforce, it was still a loss because they were valuable employees. This triggered the president to ask why these employees were leaving.

Analysis of the exit interviews by a taskforce found a lack of clarity in career direction and a fear of applying for other jobs. There was a perception that managers would stop an employee's applications or view them unfavorably. Because there was no clear career ladder, employees did not know of opportunities elsewhere in the company. This also contributed to some disengagement. With these findings, career development became

A FLEXIBLE MINDSET MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR ALL ORGANIZATIONS BECAUSE THE OPERATING CONTEXT COULD BE DIFFERENT.

a priority in the company, and a team of five career development specialists was appointed to spearhead it globally.

The career development strategy and philosophy was based on these factors:

- Employees own their career and are encouraged to think about their career development strategy.
- The organization’s role is to be supportive by making career development opportunities known and transparent across the company.

- Employees are encouraged to apply for internal positions and the organization commits to filling positions from within first.
- Employees need to stay in a position for at least 18 months and focus on learning and mastering their current role.
- Career development happens in all directions, not just upward progression.

The career development program is multi-faceted, involving managers, the organization, and of course the employees.

Flexible Mindsets Toward Career Development

Traditional Mindset	Flexible Mindset
<p>Career map enshrined on paper: Career development is a clear path we can foretell and preserve on paper.</p>	<p>Career map created along the way: Career development evolves and adapts according to life circumstances and external changes.</p>
<p>Structured career development: Competencies are mapped to jobs and these jobs are organized in different career paths, where an employee knows where she will be in three years and in five years.</p>	<p>Organic career development: Employees need to know the competencies required for jobs, but the world is changing too quickly for career paths to remain static. Rather than try to control and predict, organizations trust their employees to make the best decision at this point, re-evaluate, and navigate again.</p>
<p>The organization owns the careers: The organization manages careers and tells people where and when to be posted based on organizational needs and the career paths in the company.</p>	<p>Employees own their careers: They take ownership of their careers, and the organization’s role is to support career development by educating employees so they get clear of their career development strategy and drive it themselves.</p>
<p>Career development is driven from systems and processes: Career moves are captured in the forms or system.</p>	<p>Career development is driven more organically and based on meaningful conversations: Career development conversations are alive in the conversations between managers and employees.</p>
<p>Mindset toward managers: Our managers do not have the mindset to release people for new roles.</p>	<p>Mindset toward managers: Our managers need assistance so that they can back the career development of their staff.</p>
<p>Perennial fear: What if we develop people and they leave?</p>	<p>Provocative thought: What if we don’t develop people and they stay?</p>
<p>Organization as a parent: We need to make sure that your career development proposition makes sense to the organization.</p>	<p>Organization as a partner: We learn in every station and this learning will help you and the organization in the future.</p>
<p>Focus on the job: Nurture a person to do this job well.</p>	<p>Focus on the organization: Nurture a person for the organization.</p>



Employees have access to resources, such as tools to understand one's career aspirations and development areas, as well as education sessions to understand different parts of the business. Employees also have access to career advisers. These career advisory roles are voluntary and on top of their current jobs. Advisers give employees career advice or help them understand a different job or market.

Managers have all undergone compulsory career coaching training to equip them with skills for effective career conversations. Managers who lose a staff member in the internal application process have some scope to negotiate a viable timeframe for transition. Recruitment support is given to these managers and they also are recognized as people developers.

Organizationally, there are systems to support career development too. For example, all job postings globally are available on one platform, complete with search functions and alert features. The application process is easy and confidential. Employees do not need to tell their managers until they are seriously considered.

The HR department also is careful to manage expectations (for example, entry-level jobs are not likely to justify relocation costs). In addition, career development organizes panel discussions that help people learn about different parts of the business and career options at the same time.

After a few years of the career development program, there is greater appreciation from the business on career development services. There has been an increase in internal applicants and of vacancies filled by internal hires. Engagement scores also have improved.

Finding the sweet spot

A flexible mindset may not be suitable for all organizations because the operating context could be different. However, the crux of career development is finding an alignment

between individual values and aspirations, and requirements and possible constraints of the organization. This is the sweet spot, which then supports the engagement and retention of your people.

How can an organization get there? Here are some questions to consider around your organization's stance toward career development:

- Currently, from which mindset does your organization tend to operate?
- What kind of environment does your organization operate in—rapidly changing or stable and unchanging?
- What shift in mindset toward career development is appropriate to develop your workforce for the future?

Discuss these questions as a team. Do not seek refuge in control because the world is changing faster than anyone can control.

Based on the table, explore your organization's stance on the different dimensions and craft your organization's position on career development.

Trust your people to make good decisions for themselves and the organization, and empower your managers with the competence and confidence to support their employees along their career journey. Cultivate a new mindset, new conversations, and new careers.

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