Head Light

Career Pathways and Planning: Do You Have an App for That?

part of our We think… series

The Talent Cloud Platform

Developing Skills. Encouraging Performance. Boosting Recognition.

Contents

The focus on career planning and retention has understandably fallen off the top of the agenda of many organisations over the past few years. However, your best people will always be in demand and many respond favourably to calls from head hunters.

The question is no longer "*Are we doing enough to retain our best people?*"', but "*If retention and high performance are an outcome, are we actually doing the right things now?*"

It's not like it used to be

Careers themselves are seen differently today than in the past. The metaphor for a career has traditionally been the ladder, which is rigid and vertical and comprises a series of rungs, usually within a single or certainly a very small number of employers.

Today, a closer metaphor for today's organisation could be a climbing wall, which has a broad face that is generally vertical, but can also be traversed horizontally, and has a series of handholds and toeholds by which you can manoeuvre across the rock face. You may go straight up the rock face, or you may go at an angle, or you may go up for a while, move over to find a different path and then continue on.

In a career context, each one of these hand and toeholds can be thought of as a 2-5 year experience on a particular project or assignment, or in a role. More and more careers are defined not necessarily by permanent jobs but by roles that might be an aspect of a job or a temporary assignment.

There are some challenges for organisations to overcome if they want to be able to retain, develop and progress their people.

The changing shape of career maps

Historically, careers developed within functional silos with distinct hierarchical layers. As individuals progressed in their careers, they simply took their manager's job or moved up a few points on a grading scale.

But today, as organisations have become more complex, more matrixed, much flatter and vastly more fluid, it has become harder for employees to see where the career prospects might lie and how to work their way through the organisational maze. It has also become harder for organisations to ensure that people reach certain stages in their careers with the right experience and skill sets.

As a result, some organisations find that they have to recruit senior management from outside because it's so difficult for rising talent to get the right experience inside. In addition, when employees get lost in the organisational career maze, they may decide to advance their careers elsewhere.

Who manages a 'career'?

Organisations themselves can take widely differing views on their responsibilities in the provision of assistance for employees in managing their careers. Some are quite explicit in saying that careers belong to individuals and yet they provide little assistance to their employees to manage their career for themselves. Often the result is that employees take their careers in their hands and vote with their feet.

Other organisations believe that they have some obligation toward career management and take action to help people make career decisions, such as publishing career guides and posting internal vacancies

on the intranet. Finally, there are the organisations that carry out career management activities with a specific purpose in mind.

These latter companies are quite clear about how skill-set development happens in their organisation – for example, how talented graduates move through the organisation, or at what point in a career people need to be developing specific capabilities. In these types of organisations there's much more structure around how careers grow. Indeed, in these organisations it may be explicitly stated that employees must have worked in specific roles and geographies or have taken certain career risks, such as having worked in an emerging market or launched a new product, before they can move into senior positions.

Similarly, employees have a range of views that often mirror the organisation's philosophy. In more traditional organisations, employees tend to believe that the organisation has a responsibility to provide career movement. But younger employees in more entrepreneurial organisations believe in taking ownership of their own careers, and if the organisation doesn't provide the desired career opportunities, they will look to further their careers elsewhere and recruiters are keen to help them do so.

This does expose a major disconnect that exists in many organisations between the view that employees should be responsible for their own careers and what employees are actually able to make happen for themselves. If a company dictates that employees are responsible for their own career paths, then employees require knowledge, control and the ability to take action. But while many companies do give their employees knowledge of opportunities, these organisations usually offer the employees little control over their destinies.

If companies really want employees to take responsibility for their own careers, then they need a system that provides employees insight into the requirements of roles and an understanding of the development opportunities each role could offer.

Managing expectations

Another challenge is providing a career path that develops at a pace that is acceptable to the individual. In the past, an expectation existed that they would be promoted every five, 10 or 15 years, and they would wait in line until it was 'their turn." But today employees want to experience change every two or three years or even more frequently, and companies are struggling to match this 'velocity' of career changes to people's expectations. Mature companies with fairly stable work simply may not be able to offer a rapid career progression. These companies have to be honest with employees about career options and think about how they manage the careers of the many people who will either plateau or pass through the organisation rather than advance to senior levels.

Impact of the economy

The impact of the global economic downturn on career management has not been unexpected with retention being less of a priority than managing the deliberate shrinkage of a workforce - HR has had their hands full with many urgent redundancy and redeployment programmes. However, for many organisations career management has become much more of a priority, either because in this environment of low or no pay increases companies want to emphasize careers as part of the employment value proposition, or because it has become even more important for companies to know where their talent is. When employees are hired or placed into roles or assignments within most companies, two key drivers are usually present – the growth of the business and turnover, both of which create career opportunities for employees. But during the downturn, there's been no growth or natural turnover, so employees have become stuck in place. The challenge facing companies now, particularly since they want to use careers as a stronger part of the employment value proposition, is to create career opportunities in other ways, such as by restructuring the work, by moving staff out if they have reached a plateau or are underperforming, or through proactive churn. This is important at any time but is particularly so during a downturn or during times of prolonged uncertainty where growth plans are not fully committed to.

Workforce Planning is (often) too hypothetical

Career Apps (or Applications) are dynamic, data driven and reflect the business environment. They provide management information to both the individual about roles, paths, skills, knowledge and experiences and to the organisation about who aspires to what and where their skills gaps and development needs might be. Individually-oriented Career Apps engage individuals in their career mapping process and go far beyond simple web sites that contain largely static resources.

With individuals using tools to accurately assess and compile their skills, knowledge and aspirations a database is built that contains the actual real-life skill set of the people in the business. Workforce Planning has always included an element of 'what if', and quite rightly so when creating forecast scenarios. With only an overview of what roles exist and how they might be filled, the foundations for workforce planning are weak at best.

Career Maps to Career Apps

There are generally two kinds of career maps.

One is the pro forma career map, which shows how the organisation wants people to progress. It is designed by working backward from a destination job to identify the feeder jobs that will allow a person to get there.

The other type of career map is built on data about how and how quickly people move through roles to reveal the pathways people actually take to get to that destination job. This type of career mapping often reveals pathways the organisation wasn't aware of. It also provides information about how long it takes to follow a particular career path. If an organisation knows it will need twenty more specialist or functional managers in the next ten years, for example, it can look at how long it has taken historically to get from entry point to manager and then determine if this progression is sufficient to meet the needs of the business. If it isn't, the company can design interventions to alter or speed the process.
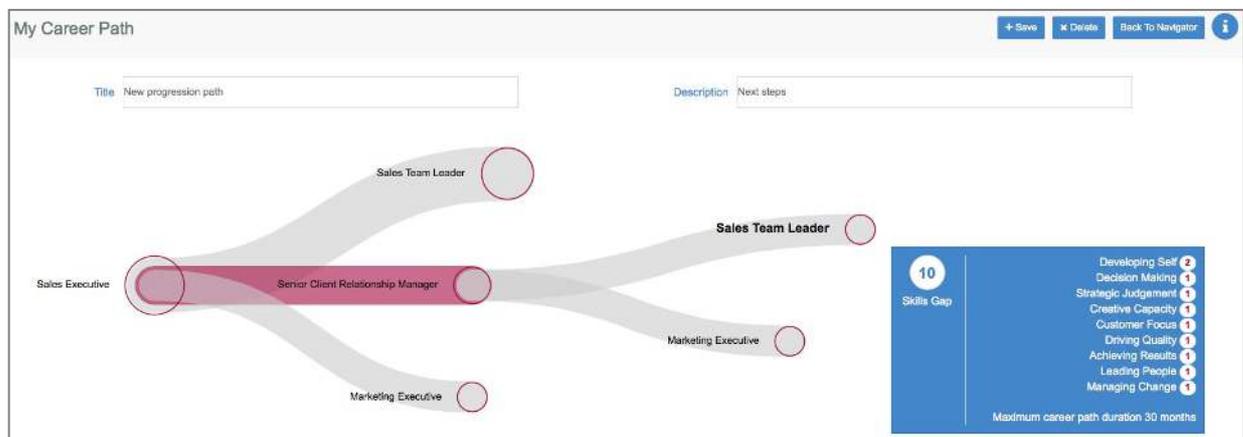
This type of career mapping often looks completely different from the ideal model that HR has produced on "how we grow jobs around here?" By mapping how people are actually moving through the business, the organisation can gain insights that will help the company make interventions that will benefit the business.

This type of mapping may uncover pinch points where people get stuck or leave the organisation and where the organisation needs to take special care to make sure the right employees get through.

Any career strategy needs to be underpinned with this data-driven understanding of how people actually move through the organisation.

The vague ethereal career discussion at appraisal time

We have all seen, as an output of an appraisal, the development needs of an individual expressed as little more than a list of training courses. Either expectations are high with the individual that they will receive so much investment or they are cynical and disbelieving merely playing lip service to the process. In both cases it is an unhappy outcome.

Career planning discussions between employee and manager are often little more than a session sharing ignorance – the manager ignorant to what the individual really wants and the bounds within which they can operate and for the employee a lack of understanding of the requirements of alternative roles and the means and timeframes to go about putting any actions into place. It may not be as bleak as this for all organisations, but it is for far too many and their staff.

An alternative conversation and resultant action plan can be enabled via the use of Career Apps that provide insight and analysis of future roles and the gaps (and development areas) that might relate to that specific individual. After all, we don't all join an organisation and then find ourselves to be clones of others in the same role and therefore only possessing the same skill sets.
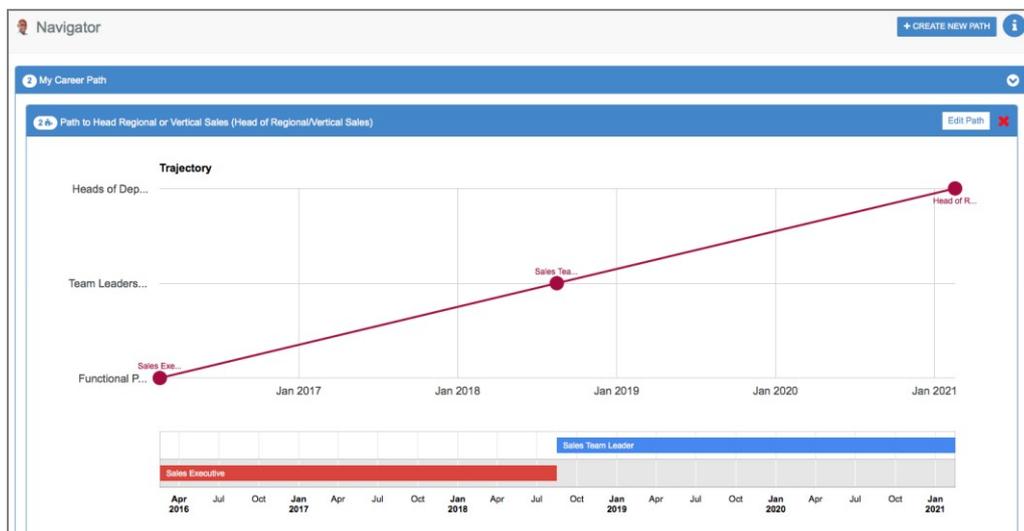
An individual's profile (or 'AboutMe' in our Career App called Talent Navigator) contains much more than just a generic profile that only provides generic answers (unlike many career planning web sites), it tailors its output to that of the individual and their aspirations as well as their work life preferences. It also acts to set expectations as to how long it might take and what capabilities might need to be acquired to reach certain roles or grades.

With this analysis, reflecting potentially many career paths, the career discussion is informed with sound insight combined with the rules and process that bind the organisation regarding promotion and selection. The development activities for that individual can now be put in context of a personal career plan. As the development of this plan has been directed by the individual in collaboration with their manager, the actions in it have far greater ownership by them both. Imagine being able to 'roll these up' and identify the size and scope of the training and development activity suggested by these plans. You would also be able to cost, prioritise and source these activities knowing exactly how they fit in. Also what would you do if you could identify those with rare skills or know-how? What if you could tell how many people saw themselves as say, Regional Directors in the next five years?

The impact you could have on the future shape of your business would be immeasurable and so many of the issues around retention and engagement could simply be side-stepped as the organisation would not suffer from them.

Looking to the (near) future

Organisations must be clear about what and how they want to influence their employees' careers. It's as basic as thinking about whether there are career paths that should be created and managed. From that, to identify the types of tools and processes to put in place to influence people when they're making career decisions.

Organisations must develop insight relating to actual career movement. They can then compare how people are moving through the organisation against how the company would like career movement to happen in order to uncover particular career flow problems or blockages. By looking at these flows, companies can identify the places where they need to intervene to help employees make the right career decisions. Organisations can also use the data to shorten the cycles employees must go through to attain key roles.

Companies also need to get oversight as to how roles are assigned. Individual managers often make such decisions with little understanding of the company's overall talent management strategy. While they may be thinking about what they need from that role today, the organisation needs these decisions to be based on what will best build the company's capabilities and retain the most people.

Performance management must move on from the manager's perspective that it is something only done as part of an appraisal. Performance management is also more than just managing current performance in the current role. The 'manager as coach' is also there to manage the performance of their team upwards and onto the next role.

Imagine if, in the sporting world, the coach kept their protégés at the coach's own level of coaching ability and never passed them up and onwards through the hierarchy to bigger and better things. Tools that support the onward and continual development, and not just the snapshot in time of an individuals' performance as often singularly viewed by a manager, are essential.

Our Talent Advance module has been designed by coaches to be a performance enhancing development environment that includes a measure of current performance, assigning and managing development goals and, importantly development activities that relate to securing the next role in that individuals' career.

Finally, companies need to start proactively managing the number and types of opportunities that, according to the data, have the biggest impact on people's careers. The roles that are the most critical to key career paths are the ones organisations should gain control of the soonest. Putting these roles in career planning tools and encouraging employees to explore and more importantly work out how to prepare themselves to be stronger candidates is a crucial step in gaining that control.

It's never too late

With career planning being a dynamic and highly personal activity that relies on role profiles, skills matrices and development options, career planning web sites just don't advance people anymore as they are just not concrete and actionable enough. Career planning and development requires people to do things, to experiment, to explore in order to make things happen in their careers.

Next steps

If you want career planning to have real impact in your organisation, talk to us about how we could help.

About Head Light

Head Light is an award-winning talent management and talent retention software and consulting firm that works with clients to define and implement impactful talent management strategies.

Talent Cloud® is our cloud-based portfolio of integrated talent management platform tools designed for those who expect the maximum return from talent management processes. Our training and consulting services uniquely complement our platform that engages employees, managers and senior leaders in the selection, development and progression of people in their businesses.

Companies in the FTSE 350, public sector, large and small, from retailers to high tech innovators have all benefitted from our tools, techniques and expertise. Founded in 2004, we are headquartered in the UK.

Head Light has attained the ISO27001 standard for Information Security. Certificate No 217613.

How do I…

transition to Continuous Performance Management

How do I…

introduce robust Succession Planning

How do I...

spot High Potentials and Future Leaders

How do I…

boost Recognition

How do I…

drive Engagement through Career Conversations and Development

How do I…

embed new values and improve culture

How do I…

develop Skills of the Future

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