



Chartered Institute  
of Personnel and  
Development

# Reflections

## Trends and issues in career management



Experts' views on the  
2003 managing employee careers survey findings

The Reflections series aims to provide members with more context and understanding of the issues raised by the CIPD annual surveys. We intend that they stimulate thinking about what current trends mean for practitioners and their organisations' activities.

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## I FOREWORD

In recent months, the CIPD has noticed a significant increase in interest from its members on what organisations are doing to support employee career development. In the 1990s, increased competition on a global scale, technological innovations and demands for lean, efficient organisations stimulated new employment patterns and organisational career paths. Today, tough economic circumstances mean that organisations are seeking competitive advantage through best use of resources and talent. But what has all this meant in terms of organisational practice? This year, for the first time, the CIPD has explored some of these issues in a new survey titled *Managing Employee Careers*. This new survey makes an interesting and important contribution to our understanding of evolving practice in career management in organisations in the UK, with its particular strength being that it gives us a view from a reasonably large sample of organisations of various sizes and sectors.

Career management is full of tensions and opportunities. Individuals want a career where there is scope for development and progression, together with opportunities to fully utilise their skills. Organisations need to ensure they have the right people in the right jobs and are building a talent pool for the future. Practitioners therefore need to take into account the needs of both the organisation and the individuals within it, thinking about how to build and retain the talent that they need, while satisfying employee career aspirations.

To complement this new CIPD survey, we invited Wendy Hirsh, a leading commentator in the field of career management, to reflect on the survey's findings and to discuss her thoughts about the findings' implications for organisations and the practitioners working within them. Alongside this, Jessica Rolph (CIPD Adviser, Learning, Training and Development) has written an essay discussing an important issue highlighted by the survey – the current lack of inclusivity of career management practices in the majority of UK organisations. Following this, a number of 'starter for ten' questions for practitioners are offered to prompt thinking on some of the key issues.

We hope that these 'think-pieces' will provide our members with a broader context and more understanding of the issues raised by the survey findings, as well as stimulating thinking about what current trends mean for their organisations' career management activities.

The CIPD *Managing Employee Careers* survey is available free to download from the CIPD website: [www.cipd.co.uk/surveys](http://www.cipd.co.uk/surveys)

**Dr Wendy Hirsh** is an independent researcher and consultant in the fields of employee and management development, and strategic human resource planning. She works with many leading employers in both the private and the public sectors to examine their changing needs for people management and how they might best be met. Wendy has a long-standing interest in career development from both the corporate and individual points of view, and in the relationship between these different perspectives.

# 1 | CAREER MANAGEMENT – MEETING THE CHALLENGE?

Dr Wendy Hirsh

The overall message coming through from the 2003 CIPD survey of career management practices can be summed up as ‘not bad, but could do better’. Some good practice is reported, but organisations appear to be struggling with two main issues: keeping career development on the core business agenda, and understanding how to make it work effectively. The survey indicates that the argument for developing a dialogue with all employees about their careers is not accepted in the majority of organisations. For the most part, career management is still seen as an optional, ‘nice to have’ activity for employees, rather than an essential part of organisational resourcing. Proactive career management is generally aimed at the ‘high-potential’ few. Organisations are, for the most part, not embracing the needs of the whole workforce when they talk about career management. All in all, the survey findings suggest that HR practitioners do have a strong interest in the potential contribution of career development, but realise that there is a significant challenge ahead of them in delivering it.

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In this reflection on the survey findings, I will consider the broader implications of its results for a number of key issues in contemporary career management:

- what organisations think career management is for
- how it is framed strategically

- who is responsible for career management, and what roles are played by senior and line managers
- what kinds of activities organisations use to support career development
- what might make for more effective career management.

At the end, some implications from the survey findings for practitioners to consider are offered.

## WHAT IS CAREER MANAGEMENT FOR?

What is the purpose of career management?

This question lies at the very heart of dealing appropriately with career issues and career development in organisations. HR professionals are so accustomed to pitching their activities at business needs and the requests of their key customers (normally senior managers), that a subject, which derives much of its importance from the needs of individuals, can cause real discomfort. Key thinkers in the field of career development, such as Schein and Hall, have paid much attention to the meaning of ‘career’ to the individual and the different factors which influence career choices and career satisfaction at various life stages. These researchers also put the difficult task of balancing individual and business needs at the very centre of the subject. The IPD guide to career management (1998) also emphasises this balance: *‘the organisation and the individual bring different perspectives to career management, and success depends on resolving these differences.’*

Current HR practice in the area of career management, however, tends to concentrate on formal ‘processes’ or ‘interventions’ driven by the

organisation to make career development happen. Not surprisingly, some of these underlying tensions about balancing organisational and individual needs are reflected in the answers given by the survey respondents. The most commonly cited strategic objectives of career management are growing future senior management, retaining key staff and supporting changes in the organisation. The first two show a clear emphasis on directing career management activities at people of particular value to the organisation. Objectives which are much less commonly prioritised are those concerned with the careers of the majority of employees: meeting the future skills needs of the organisation, the deployment and movement of staff between jobs, and supporting understanding between the organisation and the individual.

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The respondents do, though, recognise the shifting nature of careers and the need to encourage lateral moves and help employees navigate less clear career paths. These are trends that have been widely reported and discussed (Arnold, 1997; IPD, 1998). According to the survey, the career experiences which line managers are encouraged to help employees explore are those likely to help both the organisation and the employee: short- and longer-term career goals, promotion, and accessing project-type roles.

### HOW COHERENT IS THE STRATEGY FOR CAREER MANAGEMENT?

The survey responses on a range of issues concerned with clarity of career management strategy seem to amount to 'not bad, but could do better'. Only a quarter of the organisations have a formal written strategy covering the career management of all employees. Most see their career management activities as partly, but not fully, integrated with HR strategy. Most respondents also see career management as meeting business needs to some extent, but claim modest success rather than giving themselves rave reviews.

### PROMISES OR COMMITMENTS MADE ABOUT CAREERS

Career management is often described in terms of the implementation of particular activities or processes. However, most researchers in this field also emphasise the messages – and implied promises – to staff which lie behind the strategy. These are closely linked to beliefs about the context in which career management takes place and the so-called psychological contract with staff.

In the responses given to a question about the promises made to staff, we again see those tensions between individual needs and organisational context. The aspects of career development most likely to be promised to staff are opportunities to develop their skills, flexibility in aspects of their work, interesting work and reasonable levels of security. The 'employability' angle is strong here, although other research has shown unwillingness by organisations to train staff for the future as opposed

to their current jobs (Hirsh, 2000). It is also interesting that organisations are still offering a degree of job security, especially in the public sector. Things therefore seem to have calmed down a bit since Bridges (1994) heralded a world without jobs, let alone job security. The more personal aspects of career development feature less in organisational commitments, for example, advice on personal goals came lowest. Less than half the respondents felt their organisation could commit to offering employees a career – something of a problem, one might feel, for a career management strategy!

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The messages about what you have to do to progress your career are another interesting aspect of the psychological contract. The messages here are clear and unsurprising. If employees want to get on they should seek qualifications and training, greater responsibility and varied work experiences. They should not work reduced hours, take career breaks, work from home or get ill. So ‘being there’ in continuous full-time employment is a necessary, although not a sufficient, condition for career progression. It is interesting that getting qualifications is seen as important, although elsewhere in the survey the respondents say that experience and performance are more important than qualifications.

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### WHO IS REALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR CAREER MANAGEMENT?

The duality of the objectives of career management – meeting the needs of the organisation and of the individual – have led to much debate about who ‘owns’ career development. In reality, of course, individuals have always owned their own careers and certainly their own attitudes and aspirations. The turbulence of the labour market in the early 1990s led to an abrupt reconsideration of the extent to which organisations could offer job security and predictable careers. Some authors (eg Bridges, 1994) took the apparent rise in job insecurity as indicative of the demise of organisational employment. Waterman *et al.* (1994) took the same start point of job insecurity and inferred the need for employees to be able to look after their own careers and employment. They used the term ‘career resilience’ for this approach to managing your own career and also emphasised an active role for the employer in providing information, advice and support. Much of this debate has now seeped into mainstream organisational thinking. It has left us with three recognisable strands of thinking about career ownership:

- Individuals should take primary responsibility for their own careers, and be proactive in their own career development, particularly when in a rapidly

changing organisation or when unemployed.

- Employed individuals will manage their careers inside an organisation more effectively if they have information and support from their employer. Some go a little further and advocate more of a career 'partnership' between employer and employee (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995a), implying active dialogue and negotiation to meet the needs of both parties.
- Organisations have a vested interest in taking more initiative in planning for the careers of their most valued employees, typically senior managers and their potential successors.

All these strands of career ownership are reflected in the survey responses. The large majority of respondents agreed with all of the following: advocating individual ownership of career development, and the need for individuals to be increasingly proactive; a partnership approach between employer and employee; career development should be available to all staff; employees need advice, support and training in how to manage their careers. The survey answers about the objectives of career management emphasise the proactive development of future leaders, as does the extensive use of processes aimed at this population. The public sector seems to rely on the employee more strongly to drive career management – possibly one of the reasons it is rather less effective.

These responses are as expected, but they do amount to a difficult message to convey to employees. The message about managing your own career can easily

be heard by employees as saying 'you're on your own', with the messages about career partnership and support being less audible. We also see that the career management activities undertaken offer information support to employees, but probably fall short of an active partnership. The message about the organisation's need to develop certain groups of people can also seem at odds with the more universal messages about career support. This is not to say that the strategic thinking is flawed, only that the communication challenge is considerable.

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### THE PART PLAYED BY SENIOR AND LINE MANAGERS

In line with general HR thinking these days, HR professionals try to get senior managers to promote and drive career management strategy and also rely on the line (especially the individual's immediate boss) to implement the organisation's side of the process. Gratton *et al.* (1999) put the line manager in a pivotal role in the delivery of what they call the 'new career', but also call into question their ability to deliver: *'the rhetoric of new careers places responsibility for career counselling on the shoulders of line managers. They may be willing to take responsibility for his, but they may not have either the time, the information or the interpersonal skills to complete such a task.'*

This survey shows that getting this degree of involvement in career management from line managers is still an uphill struggle. Again, the questions about line involvement amount to a ‘not bad, but could do better’ response. Career management activities are mostly driven by the HR function and by individuals, with the board and the line taking rather secondary responsibility. Those in senior management are often partly committed to career management, but only ‘firmly committed’ in a third of cases. It seems that the line will play a part but need to be coaxed and cajoled by the HR function on the one hand and employees on the other. HR practitioners need to devise ways of helping line managers support career development more effectively, particularly since one of the major barriers to career management is reported as being a ‘lack of time’. Other research has shown that career education for employees can help them extract support from their bosses (Yarnall, 1998), so this should be an area of focus for practitioners.

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Many HR professionals would see these responses as disappointing. My personal view is that there are real reasons why career development needs stronger ‘hands on’ HR input than many other areas of people management. Some of the reasons for this include: its future orientation which makes it slip down the business agenda; the need sometimes for expert and confidential career support; and the need to facilitate career moves across functional or

business unit boundaries. These are not reasons to pull line managers out of their role in career management, but they do imply more proactive HR input alongside that of the line.

If organisations were really serious about line managers taking the lead in supporting the career management of their staff, they would train them to do it. Not surprisingly, the survey shows only a minority of managers receiving such training. This will reinforce the ‘optional extra’ status which career management so often has in the line – nice if you have the time and interest, but not really all that important. Over a third of respondents were brave enough to admit that career management is not a business priority, although about half disagreed with this view.

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### CAREER MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

The survey tells us what activities or processes HR people think are being deployed in their organisations, which employees they cover, and how effective they are felt to be. Much of what appears from this picture is what one would expect. I presented a rather unkind and over-simplified picture of career management practice in a recent essay for the CIPD (2002). The survey bears out some, but not all, of the features of that caricature. It shows that:

- Succession planning is one of the more common processes, although it remains difficult to implement effectively. A high proportion of respondents reported their organisations had some career processes aimed at specific populations (such as high-potential or graduate schemes). This links with the survey findings that the dominant objective for career management is developing future leaders. Other research would support this view (Gratton *et al.*, 1999).
- Appraisal is the only formal process applied to nearly all employees. The survey respondents who used this process found it only moderately effective. Other research has shown it is not very helpful for career dialogue (Hirsh *et al.*, 2001).
- An open internal job market is now very common (Hirsh *et al.*, 2000) and available to the whole workforce, often supported by an online vacancy board. The survey shows the open job market is most used in organisations with lower proportions of managers and professionals. It is felt to be an effective process, as least by HR practitioners.

The survey shows some other features which are interesting:

- Over two-thirds of organisations offered some form of career support such as career information, counselling, or workshops. With the exception of information (often now intranet-based), most of the initiatives are not offered to all staff. They are, however, less common than the targeted forms of career management for potential senior managers.
- Informal career support is, as we would expect, very widespread. It is interesting, however, that

over three-quarters of respondents felt that HR or training people in their organisation offered informal career support to employees.

The proportions of organisations using various kinds of career development intervention are roughly in line with figures found in other research in other countries (Arnold, 1997). Although the public sector inclines more towards a 'whole workforce' strategy in terms of its stated objectives, the pattern of activities are not very different from one sector to another. The private sector seems to use succession planning rather more, and the public sector is keener on external secondments. The voluntary sector is not yet so likely to offer formal support in the form of career information or advice. Smaller organisations, not surprisingly, use formal career management activities rather less than larger organisations.

Looking across the piece, we see active career management for key groups plus a 'core' offering for all staff of appraisal, a more open job market, informal advice (from the line and often HR) and perhaps some career information or tools. In some organisations, this will be supplemented by processes that offer more in-depth support to self-development. The Achilles heel of this prevalent pattern is that appraisal is really the only process directed at all employees which offers significant formal career dialogue between employee and employer. Given that the whole notion of career partnership rests on dialogue (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995a), the few minutes at the end of an appraisal review often given to career issues seem most unlikely to be able to bear the burden of this strategy.

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#### WHAT MAKES FOR EFFECTIVE CAREER MANAGEMENT?

Of course what we most want to know is which aspects of strategy and activity relate to more effective career management. This survey offers us the views of HR people about effectiveness in terms of whether career management meets its objectives. We need to bear in mind, however, that HR professionals may take a more optimistic view of their activities than employees who are on the receiving end of career management practices or the line managers who are asked to deliver them.

Overall, the HR respondents feel that career management in their organisations is partly, but not wholly, effective. This applies to the extent to which it meets its objectives, how seriously it is taken by line managers, how much employees value it and how committed senior managers are. The public sector respondents are more pessimistic than the private sector on effectiveness. It is impossible to know whether this is just a cultural difference (the public sector being more self-critical). If the difference is real, it seems to link with a less integrated approach, weaker links with HR and business strategy, and a stronger reliance on employees to make sure career management takes

place. The public sector respondents did not report lower commitment by the line or senior management.

The barriers to better career management appear to be practical rather than philosophical. We might expect, for example, that uncertainty about the future would be a barrier, but this was not rated highly. The main barriers are seen as lack of time/resources; being seen as peripheral; and a lack of senior management commitment – all to do with *getting it done* rather than problems with its strategic intent.

The survey indicates that a whole bundle of items line up in a positive way with a higher perception of effective career management. This bundle includes:

- a formal, written career management strategy
- the integration of career management with overall HR strategy
- career management activities being valued by employees
- commitment from senior management
- line management taking it seriously
- training for line managers.

Of course, we can't easily be sure of cause and effect in these patterns. However, one might deduce that two key activities for the HR function should be (a) working hard to involve senior management both in strategy and implementation and (b) training line managers much more thoroughly for the role they are expected to undertake.

It is worth asking whether the use of any particular career management processes is associated with the

overall perceived effectiveness of career management. The organisations that were rated by the respondents as very effective overall in career management were likely to use: succession planning, career counselling by trained staff, career coaching, formal mentoring, internal assignments, managed career moves, formal appraisal, an open job market and informal support (especially from managers). The highest correlations between having a process and overall effectiveness in meeting career management objectives were for career coaching, counselling by trained people, succession planning, development programmes and informal support from managers.

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### WORKING WITH THE TENSIONS INHERENT IN CAREER MANAGEMENT

The survey shows HR professionals having to work with some of the contradictions and tensions inherent in career management today, including:

- Career management is about the future of the organisation, and also about the effective deployment and development of all employees. Even so, keeping it on the agenda is a struggle. A third of respondents do not feel that it is a business priority, although half think it is.
- Career management is inevitably about both key groups of staff and all employees. Most HR people seem to believe that it should apply to all employees. Yet priority is given to key groups both in terms of overall objectives and in terms of activities. The organisations with effective career management do seem to be using a dual strategy of targeted career management and more universal support. Very little priority is given to groups who are disadvantaged in career terms. This leaves the central message about careers still confused, with only about half the respondents feeling that their organisation commits to providing employees with a career.
- HR people recognise the concern employees have about work–life balance, and most of their organisations claim to offer flexibility in aspects of work; yet there is still apparently no faster way to derail your career than to reduce your hours to balance work with family responsibilities. Other studies, such as Kodz *et al.* (2002) have found that concerns about career prospects cause much of the ‘work–life balance take-up gap’ between flexible working policies and their take-up by employees.
- Current orthodoxy has it that career management – along with the rest of people management – should be mainly supported by the line. However, it is clear that the strongest pressure to pay attention to career issues still comes from HR and from employees. Only a minority of line managers are being trained for their role in career development support.

This survey gives us much food for thought. It shows that career management is of considerable concern to the HR community and an area receiving quite a lot of practical attention in organisations. Communicating a clear strategy, juggling priorities and getting activities sufficiently embedded to deliver real benefit seem to be continuing challenges.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- Organisations need to send clearer messages about the business case for career management. Career management should improve the deployment of skills and develop a stronger and more flexible skills base for the future, as well as supporting the attraction, motivation and retention of high-quality staff.
- Senior managers, while increasingly involved in career management, struggle to keep it high on their priority list. The HR function still has to make the running in keeping attention and sufficient resources directed at the career management agenda. To achieve this, the HR function needs to be an active player in career management, and to allocate enough of its own resources to offering practical career support.
- Career management in most organisations requires two strategies to work side by side. The first pillar of the strategy facilitates planned career development for selected groups of staff the organisation wants to 'bring on' for other roles. The second pillar of the strategy offers information, advice and support to all employees who wish to develop their careers. Both pillars of the strategy need to be carefully tuned to the real career issues of the organisation and its workforce.
- Organisations expect all employees to manage their own careers; all managers to support other employees in their career development; and senior managers to take a strategic lead and provide positive role models. There is at present inadequate training to equip employees for their roles in career management.
- Staff surveys could be used to give feedback from employees on which specific aspects of career management are working well and which not so well. For example, are employees having useful career discussions? Are they getting the advice they need? Do they have adequate information about career options? Is the open job market working fairly?

**Jessica Rolph** was appointed to her current position as CIPD Adviser, Learning, Training and Development, in July 2002. Since joining, Jessica has developed the CIPD's first survey on career management practices (*Managing Employee Careers: Issues, Trends and Prospects*) as well as managing the production of the CIPD annual *Training and Development Survey*.

Jessica has a BSc in psychology (University of Manchester) and an MSc in occupational and organisational psychology (University of Surrey). Before joining the CIPD, Jessica worked as a Senior HR Consultant for Norwich Union Healthcare and as a consultant at William M. Mercer, specialising in performance and development projects.

## 2 | MANAGING CAREERS – FROM PRIVILEGED PERK TO OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

Jessica Rolph

One of the most discouraging issues highlighted by the 2003 CIPD survey, *Managing Employee Careers*, is the lack of inclusivity of career management in UK organisations. Few organisations provide effective career support to 'all' employees on managing their careers. Instead, they tend to provide more extensive career management activities for key groups of staff, giving far less thought to the careers of the rest of the workforce. Those with caring responsibilities, those who take career breaks and those working part-time (primarily women), remain disadvantaged in the workplace in terms of career progression. And very few organisations are doing anything to support employee groups that have traditionally been disadvantaged in terms of career development.<sup>1</sup> In sum, the majority of organisations are still finding it difficult to balance the focused

career management of select populations with wider support for the whole workforce and specific help for traditionally disadvantaged employee groups.

Employers have repeatedly been warned that a number of problems await them in terms of the future availability of skilled resources (see Table 1). A tough economy, significant skills shortages and a future 'demographic time-bomb' resulting in a shortage of young people entering the workforce, are all problems already facing many organisations. However, the survey results indicate that, despite this, very little is being done to rethink how career management can help organisations grow and develop their existing resources and talent to counter these issues.

**TABLE 1: FROM THE PAPERS**

- 'Strategies are needed to prevent the flight of talent.' *Financial Times*
- 'The attraction and retention of talented employees is the number-one concern of Chief Executives in Europe.' *Conference Board Magazine*
- 'Scots are told: "Skills gap will hit economy."' *People Management*
- 'Public sector facing recruitment crisis.' *Audit Commission*
- 'Search for talent is top issue facing HR Directors.' *Personnel Today*
- 'Unemployment falls to 27-year low.' *Financial Times*
- 'Skills shortages force up pay despite fall in number of vacancies.' *People Management*

<sup>1</sup> Employee groups that have traditionally been disadvantaged by career management practices include women and minority employee groups such as ethnic minorities, plateaued managers, flexible workers, older workers and part-time workers. For more information on this issue, please see JACKSON, T. (2000) *Career Development*. London, CIPD.

The consequences of organisations' failure to predict the effects of declining investment in career development are now with us. Skills shortages are affecting many industry sectors and this must be stifling organisations' competitive advantage. In the public sector, continuing problems in attracting staff highlight the importance of developing employees' capability to the full. Many researchers also fear that skills shortages may be contributing to the productivity gap between the UK and other European countries (eg Finegold and Soskice, 1988; Philpott, 2002). Career management remains a key issue for organisational resourcing because it provides mechanisms to effectively develop and deploy employee skills. Mockler (2002) argues that, *'the sheer pace and degree of change means that we must now take a long hard look at what we mean by career development, and how such varied experience can be mined for the benefit of the individual and his or her employer.'*

The consequences of organisations' failure to predict the effects of declining investment in career development are now with us. Skills shortages are affecting many industry sectors and this must be stifling organisations' competitive advantage.

The challenge for employers is to consider how they are going to respond. Now is the time to get career management back on the organisational agenda. Understandably in the current economic downturn, employers may be reluctant to make bold promises about employees' career prospects. But, although it is difficult, organisations need to see beyond the current economic situation and take a longer-term

view of their organisation's resourcing requirements. Alongside progressing the careers of key employees, they also need to embrace the whole workforce and try to develop their skills and experience to meet future needs. As Hirsh (2002) pointed out, *'keeping employees at a standstill where they are, in skill and job terms, is not a realistic option.'* The remainder of this essay will briefly review some key aspects of the CIPD survey findings and their implications for practitioners. Following this, some key questions for organisations to 'kick-start' their thinking on some of these issues will be provided.

#### **SO, WHAT DID THE SURVEY TELL US? AND WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS?**

The results of the survey illustrated that career management is considered an important issue by the HR community and is receiving a lot of practical attention in organisations. But, what is clear is that active career management is generally aimed at key groups of staff, with the rest of the workforce being somewhat neglected. The survey findings highlighted three main issues that contribute to the prevalent non-inclusive approach to managing employee careers. Organisations for the most part are failing to adopt a 'whole workforce' strategy for career management, little support is offered to traditionally disadvantaged employee groups and most organisations are still operating a traditional, vertical, career progression model. The specific survey results on these three issues will now be described in turn.

Active career management is generally aimed at key groups of staff, with the rest of the workforce being somewhat neglected.

### 1. Lack of a 'whole workforce' approach to career management

The vast majority of organisations still do not have a strategy for career management that covers 'all staff' (only 26% do). Where strategies do exist, they are far more likely to cover particular groups of employees such as senior management, graduates and professionals. Organisations' strategic objectives for career management emphasise this focus on 'special staff', with the two main ones being 'retaining key staff' and 'growing senior managers/leaders'. This sits at odds with some of the opinions about career management that were given in the survey, such as 79% of respondents agreeing that *'career development should be available to all staff, rather than concentrated on an elite band of staff.'*

On balance, HR practitioners appear to believe that organisations should be adopting a 'partnership model' approach to career management – 80% of respondents agreed this was essential. In this partnership deal, individuals should 'own' their own careers,<sup>2</sup> but employers should support them by offering advice, support and training.<sup>3</sup> The reality, however, seems to be that individuals are pushed

towards fulfilling their side of the 'deal', taking ownership for their own career development, but most employers are not delivering their side of the deal. Few line managers are trained, only a minority of organisations have career management strategies for 'all' staff and many of the practices are not valued or felt to be effective.

One of the most powerful findings from the survey was that organisations with effective career management do seem to be using a dual strategy of both focused career management and wider career support. The current trend of a lack of support for 'all' employees demands a response from HR practitioners and organisations in general. HR practitioners need to work hard to sell to their organisations the business case for a more inclusive approach to career management.

Employers are not delivering their side of the deal. Few line managers are trained, only a minority of organisations have career management strategies for 'all' staff and many of the practices are not valued or felt to be effective.

### 2. What is being done to support the career development of traditionally disadvantaged employee groups?

Providing additional support to employees who are traditionally disadvantaged in terms of career progression is understood to be crucial to effective

<sup>2</sup> 86% of respondents agreed with the statement, 'we advocate individual ownership of career development.'

<sup>3</sup> 80% of respondents agreed that 'employees need advice, support and training in how to manage their careers.'

diversity management. The survey results indicate that HR professionals appear to recognise the need to help these employees navigate career paths. This is illustrated in the vast majority of respondents agreeing that *'career management needs to meet the needs of those in non-conventional career paths'* and *'special attention needs to be paid to the career management of certain groups of workers.'*

However, despite the widespread agreement on this issue, little is being done in terms of practical assistance. For example, only a quarter of organisations offered additional support to part-time workers. Similar results were reported for women returning to work after having children, employees returning to work after a career break, older workers and employees returning to work after long-term absence. In general, then, the survey results reveal that employee groups that have traditionally been disadvantaged by career practices remain disadvantaged.

So what does this mean? Perhaps HR professionals realise that these groups of employees should be given additional support and assistance and yet are not receiving senior management support or the resources to make this happen. Or perhaps this is still relatively new on the organisational agenda and so is taking some time to become part of the working practices in the majority of organisations. Another issue that may be contributing here is that practitioners may fear a backlash from other employees if they perceive efforts aimed at specific employee groups as 'affirmative action' or 'positive discrimination'.

The survey results reveal that employee groups that have traditionally been disadvantaged by career practices remain disadvantaged.

Overall, however, the results indicate that organisations are currently taking a very passive approach to managing the careers of these non-traditional segments of their workforce. They are not, therefore, reaping many of the benefits of developing and retaining their knowledge, experience and skills within the organisation. The CIPD 2002 *Recruitment and Retention Survey* reported that 77% of employers in the survey had encountered difficulties in finding suitable recruits. It therefore seems as though recruiting and developing staff from non-traditional sources is key to the future growth of many organisations. More and more practitioners and academics are now suggesting that it makes good business sense for organisations to take a fresh look at how they can improve their HR structures to attract and develop a more diverse employee pool (Robinson and Dechant, 1997; Herriot and Pemberton; 1995b; Anderson and Metcalf, 2003). Hopefully, career management will be an area for change in the near future.

It makes good business sense for organisations to take a fresh look at how they can improve their HR structures to attract and develop a more diverse employee pool.

### 3. The traditional model of career progression – alive and well?

Despite the increasing rates of economic, organisational and technical change, the messages about career progression in the survey are surprisingly traditional. The main factors felt to positively influence career progression are: gaining extra qualifications; undertaking work-related training; taking on extra work responsibilities; and working in a number of business locations/areas. The factors felt to negatively influence career progression are: taking a long period of sickness; needing time for family responsibilities; working flexible or reduced hours; and taking a career break.

The results illustrate how little change there has been in terms of what helps and hinders career progression in organisations. The results indicate that people who take advantage of family-friendly policies are still viewed negatively in terms of career advancement. It is likely that this is because employees who take up these options are generally considered to have no interest in their career progression. Current career management practices still seem to take little account of individuals' needs and family circumstances. Naturally, this does little to help and encourage the career progression of those with family responsibilities and may be having a detrimental effect on employee commitment and loyalty. Recent CIPD research on the links between HR practices and business performance (Purcell *et al.*, 2003) showed that positive perceptions of career advancement opportunities are one of the most powerful determinants of employee commitment to an organisation.

People who take advantage of family-friendly policies are still viewed negatively in terms of career advancement.

Things are perhaps not as bad as they first seem. Taking advantage of family-friendly working policies is understood to 'not affect career progression' in the majority of organisations. For example, although almost 30% thought that taking a career break would have a negative impact on career progression, over half of respondents thought it 'would not affect' career progression. Similarly, although needing time for family responsibilities was viewed as negatively impacting on career progression in a quarter of organisations, it was felt not to affect career progression in almost two-thirds of organisations. The one exception is taking a long period of sickness. Here, over 60% of organisations felt that it would have a negative impact on career progression.

The survey results did highlight the considerable problem that still surrounds female career progression towards the top level of organisations – over two-thirds of respondents (69%) believed that 'the glass ceiling for women is still very evident in the majority of organisations.' Clearly there are still barriers to women's advancement at work. In the UK, women make up just over 20% of managers and senior officials. Four-fifths of part-time workers are women and women remain a minority in professional and managerial positions and in key growth areas such as technology (Advancing Women, 2003). The issue is receiving widespread

attention. The Higgs Review (2003) on the role and effectiveness of non-executive directors noted the *'shocking under-representation of women in the boardroom'* and Patricia Hewitt, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, and Barbara Roche, Minister for Social Exclusion and Equality, launched a handbook of good practice on 'Advancing women in the workplace' in January 2003.

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From the career survey findings, it is clear that ceilings and walls exist throughout many workplaces for female and other minority-group employees. These barriers result from institutional and psychological practices, and limit the advancement and mobility of employees of diverse backgrounds. Despite all the rhetoric about the need for responsive, fast-moving organisations and flexible lifestyles, the career progression model still appears to be heavily influenced by the full-time, male-oriented, vertical advancement model. This is not, however, overly surprising given that CIPD research, *Organising for Success in the Twenty-First Century – A Starting Point for Change* (CIPD, 2002), has shown that contrary to reports of organisations radically changing shape through delayering and restructuring, the traditional hierarchical organisational structure is still the prevalent model.

HR practitioners need to establish effective strategies to combat stereotyping around career progression in organisations. Action is also needed by companies to broaden the pool of people they recruit, develop and promote, in order to create greater diversity at senior levels in organisations.

#### CONCLUSIONS – TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE MODEL

For the last decade or so, employers have been responding to pressures and changes in the external business environment by seeking much greater organisational flexibility and efficiency. However, what has been ignored for the most part is how career structures and processes could be redesigned to improve the effectiveness, flexibility and utilisation of organisations' human resources. At the moment, organisations have not harnessed the experience, knowledge, skills and creativity of their full employee base. Nor have they adapted their career management processes to reflect and address the changing values and needs of their workforces.

A more employee-oriented and inclusive model of career management is not about giving certain employees preferential treatment. It is about 'levelling the playing field' and taking action to remove barriers to career progression in organisations. Worman (2003) states that, *'we need to be prepared to focus on developing different and appropriate management styles and systems in order to be better at embracing diversity. Failure to do this by resisting change*

*will reduce the potential that managing diversity has to offer.'*

A more employee-oriented and inclusive model of career management is not about giving certain employees preferential treatment. It is about 'levelling the playing field' and taking action to remove barriers to career progression in organisations.

Much has been said about the 'war for talent' and 'the business case for managing diversity', but the survey reveals that most employers have yet to respond meaningfully. Organisations need to offer career packages and practices that provide 'all' employees with opportunities to develop and progress. Modern technology gives us the power to open up career management processes to the entire workforce, but before this happens HR practitioners need to persuade leaders that career management is about the future of the organisation and the effective deployment and development of all employees – not only the privileged few.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS – WHAT SHOULD THE NEXT STEPS BE?**

What different organisations can offer employees in terms of career progression and development varies hugely. HR practitioners need to bear in mind that the nature of their organisation (sector, size etc) will strongly influence the types of career management activities which will be appropriate in that environment. For example, it is not appropriate

(or possible) for smaller organisations to offer some of the more sophisticated or formal career management activities that some large organisations are able to offer. But small businesses can still find informal ways of providing development opportunities and encouraging skills development, and they can still work to make sure that their HR practices are not unfairly disadvantaging certain employee groups. Whatever the type, organisations must make sure they are offering clear and honest messages to employees about career and development prospects.

It is not possible to offer any definitive answers or solutions about how organisations should deal with current or future career-management or resourcing challenges. But, hopefully, the 'starter for ten' questions for practitioners offered in the sections below will at least trigger your thinking on key issues, what (if any) changes are necessary, and what is appropriate and would work in your organisation. Some of the main areas to consider are:

- a) researching and monitoring to provide up-to-date information
- b) recruitment and selection processes
- c) training and development opportunities
- d) availability of career advice and information
- e) equipping line managers to have effective career conversations
- f) encouraging and supporting a level playing field for employee career progression.

### a) Researching and monitoring to provide up-to-date information

For effective organisational resourcing, organisations need to have accurate and reliable databases of all employees' skills and development, alongside systems for tracking vacancies and providing information about opportunities. Without this it is very difficult to make good decisions about career management activities or to provide valid information to employees or managers.

Organisations can use a number of methods to identify whether barriers to career progression of certain employee groups exist. Employers may find that existing data, routinely kept in relation to recruitment and promotion, is sufficient to pinpoint if, and where, action needs to be targeted. But sometimes additional research is necessary. Possible

activities can include reviews of current policies and procedures, staff surveys, focus groups and statistical analyses of the gender/minority-group balance across jobs or promotions. Monitoring against external competitors and/or standards can also help an organisation to benchmark its progress.

Forums or committees that address equal opportunities or diversity issues are one way of driving change in this area. They can review strategy, policies, legislation, trends, employee feedback, and progress towards targets. For example, some organisations have set up 'glass ceiling forums' run by female executives to explore barriers to female career progression. However, with any of these approaches it is very important to be clear where accountability and responsibility lies for success.

#### 'STARTER FOR TEN' QUESTIONS

- Is there a central database of individuals' skills and career development plans? Are managers encouraged to contribute to it and refer to it in making staffing decisions?
- Have you researched the existence and possible causes of 'glass ceilings' for different employee groups? For example, are there any severe gender imbalances between lower and senior grades?
- Have you spoken to any diversity experts or groups internally, and externally, about what they see as the barriers to recruitment and progression within the company?
- Do you audit the skills and progression of minority-group employees?

**b) Recruitment and selection processes**

The processes organisations have in place for selecting candidates for jobs within an organisation can themselves result in problems in terms of equal opportunities. Issues can arise from advertising, job descriptions, and selection processes (Taylor, 1998).

For example, research has indicated that some psychometric tests may unfairly disadvantage certain groups (IPD, 1997; BPS, 2003). Organisations having problems with advancing women and minority-group employees need to take a close look at whether any aspects of their selection processes are to blame.

**'STARTER FOR TEN' QUESTIONS**

- Where is the best place to advertise posts to gain a diverse pool of applicants in your area?  
Can you introduce new recruitment advertising initiatives such as targeting non-traditional press?
- Are internal vacancies advertised in such a way that all employees (for example, those at remote sites or who work from home) will see them?
- Do any of the job requirements in a job description unfairly disadvantage or put off certain employees from applying?
- Does promotion in your organisation depend on access to informal networks? Are these networks less accessible to some employee groups?
- Are selection processes biased in relation to gender or diversity?
- Does succession planning take place in your organisation? Is it effective?
- Do interview panels for recruitment, selection and promotion fairly represent all employee groups?
- Are managers and HR staff trained to raise their awareness of diversity issues that may influence selection processes?

### c) Training and development opportunities

Ensuring that all employees have access to training is very important in creating equality of opportunity in terms of career progression. Training provision should take account of different types of working patterns and caring commitments. For example, employers should try and organise training around the hours of part-time staff or provide assistance with childcare to resolve difficulties.

Employers should take positive steps to ensure that traditionally disadvantaged employees such as older workers and part-timers are encouraged to attend training. Setting targets for training in the form of expected numbers or proportions of women and minority-group employees could help organisations see the extent to which they are achieving their aims.

#### **'STARTER FOR TEN' QUESTIONS**

- Has thought been given to the future skills needs of the business, as well as filling current vacancies?  
For example, do you map current employee skills against future business requirements?
- Is training organised so that everyone it is intended for can actually participate?
- Are all employees (including non-permanent staff) aware of training opportunities open to them?
- Do current training and development opportunities need to be revised to help women and minority-group employees progress?
- Have you considered setting targets for female and minority-group employees' participation in in-house training schemes?

**d) Availability of career advice and information**

Employers must ensure that career advice and guidance is available to all employees. Given the move towards individual ownership of career development, it is important to make sure that all employee groups have access to career support or information. Technological advances have meant that information dissemination is now easier and more cost-effective than before. Company intranets can make it easier for employees to access information and apply for vacancies or development opportunities. This is illustrated by 71% of respondents in the CIPD *2002 Recruitment and Retention Survey* agreeing that 'the Internet, intranet and e-mail are really useful recruitment tools.'

Employees must have the opportunity to assess and discuss their strengths and weaknesses to provide them with a better understanding of their career prospects and areas where they may need to develop in the future. This is where career/learning resources centres or career specialists have a key role to play.

Employers can help employee groups that have traditionally been disadvantaged in terms of career progression by arranging for them to have access to specific career advice and support, such as help with setting career objectives.

**'STARTER FOR TEN' QUESTIONS**

- Is career advice and guidance available to all your employees, not just key staff? Which employee groups may have problems in accessing information?
- Are messages about prospects for career development within the organisation honest and realistic?
- Are all employees encouraged to form a realistic impression of their potential? What information do they have to draw on? Is it reliable?
- Is information provided to all employees about different career opportunities in the organisation and the sorts of skills required?
- Are employees given the opportunity to discuss possible options for career development such as promotion, secondments and job moves?
- Are employees' personal career ambitions and mobility preferences taken into account in organisational resourcing decisions? Are they documented anywhere?
- Have you considered that some types of employees may need additional advice in managing their careers?

### e) Equipping line managers to have effective career conversations

Line managers have a crucial role to play in helping employees plan their careers and identify development opportunities. Research shows that employees exhibit low levels of motivation to manage their own learning and development. This problem can be exacerbated if line managers are either poorly trained to support development, or if they simply don't think it is worth their time and effort. Recent CIPD research, *Understanding the people and performance link: unlocking the black box* (Purcell *et al.*, 2003) highlights the crucial role of line managers in delivering HR strategy and effective practices.

The CIPD survey results show that few managers appear to take career management seriously or are trained to provide effective career discussions to their team members. CIPD research indicated that, if delivered well, HR practices such as career development and training can contribute to producing highly committed, motivated employees (Purcell *et al.*, 2003). This is where line managers have an important role to play. If line managers are to be the main source of support for employees in terms of career support, organisations need to properly equip them with the training, guidance and information to perform their task effectively. Much needs to be done to make line managers understand why career management is important to future individual and organisational success.

#### 'STARTER FOR TEN' QUESTIONS

- Are managers aware of the business benefits of investing in career management and are they encouraged to give career management activities sufficient priority?
- Have issues relating to managers' time and resource constraints on involvement in career management activities been considered?
- Are managers skilled in identifying and addressing the development needs of their staff?
- Are managers equipped to have discussions with employees about their development and career progression in the organisation? Have managers been given training in skills such as coaching, counselling and managing poor performance?

**f) Encouraging and supporting a level playing field for employee career progression**

Employees with caring responsibilities can find it difficult to combine work with their other responsibilities. Employers who wish to retain and progress traditionally disadvantaged employees can consider a range of strategies that will help employees combine employment with family obligations. Examples include staggered hours, compressed working hours, job-sharing, part-time work, flexible working hours, shift-swapping, time off in lieu, annual hours, term-time working, working at or from home, and breaks from work.

Mentoring can be an effective way of supporting women and other minority-group employees' progression in an organisation because it offers role models and a network of support. Mentoring programmes can facilitate the sharing of skills and experiences and encourage employees to set realistic career goals. It can play an important role in motivating and equipping women and other minority-group employees to apply for, and obtain, promotion in senior management grades.

Networks aimed at particular employee groups can provide additional support by improving morale, promoting education and training opportunities and facilitating networking. For example, some organisations have established women's networks or support groups for disabled employees to encourage progression and development.

Employers can also support local schools in challenging stereotyping and widening work choices. Changes to 14–19 education and training that introduce a wider range of vocational options will create new opportunities for employers to work with young people to sell the benefits of their industry and to encourage non-traditional job choices. Employers can offer work placements and enterprise opportunities to boys/girls in sectors where they are currently under-represented. Employers can also help with careers education in schools by releasing employees as role models to talk to groups in schools.

**'STARTER FOR TEN' QUESTIONS**

- Are women and other minority-group employees represented in all areas of your business and at all levels? Is this in proportion to their overall numbers?
- Do women and other minority-group employees have access to networks of support?
- Have you considered mentoring arrangements or job-shadowing to encourage the career progression of women and minority-group employees?
- Have you considered setting up a forum or committee to review progress towards diversity targets?
- Is your organisation being proactive in challenging traditional stereotypes about certain jobs eg typical male/female roles? Has your organisation tried engaging with schools, universities and targeting careers fairs to overcome stereotypes and widen the diversity of your applicants?

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

Hopefully these questions will prompt organisations to start re-thinking their current approaches to career management. The answers you reach should drive change and improvement in career management practices. Many organisations need to open up career management, from being an elite service for key employee groups, to a more employee-oriented, 'whole workforce' approach. It is only with this change of approach that organisations will be able to address current resourcing challenges and make the best use of their talent for future needs.

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# Notes

# Notes

The CIPD explores leading-edge people management and development issues at a strategic level. Our aim is to share knowledge to increase learning and understanding to improve practice. We produce surveys, 'think-piece' Change Agendas, introductory Quick Facts and Topics for Trainers that all are available to download from our website.

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