

Text for further reading 1

Area: HORIZONS

Career development at work. A review of career guidance to support people in employment

Changes in the way work is structured and organised, together with the growth of the knowledge-based economy, will require a re-conceptualisation of what a career means to people (Arnold and Jackson, 1997). For much of the 20th century, the term ‘career’ was used primarily to describe the occupational choice and work history of managers and professionals. It was often linked to ideas of progression up an organisational hierarchy. While many people continue to pursue this kind of organisational career, many others will be leading very different working lives. In the future it will be important to develop a more inclusive model that supports the learning and development of all those participating in the EU economy of the 21st century.

‘Career’ is a multifaceted concept. It can be about meaning, sense of purpose and direction. It also includes ideas of progression and development both at work and at a personal level. In this way, it embraces ideas about lifelong learning as well as skill development. It is also concerned with people’s futures – the skills they want to develop, what they want to achieve at work and as a person – as well as their future employability in a rapidly changing labour market. New career concepts, such as the portfolio career (Handy, 1989) – when someone has more than one job (paid or unpaid) – and the “boundaryless” career (Arthur, 1994) – pursuing a career across traditional boundaries, such as across organisations (i.e. not within a single organisation), or across functional or job boundaries – recognise that career has a subjective component: the sense that people make of their own career, their personal histories, and the skills, attitudes and beliefs that they have acquired. These concepts are also in part a response to, and recognition of, the fact that professionals and specialists – knowledge workers – may pursue their careers somewhat differently from other groups and are often more loyal to their professional community than to their current employer. For example, they may be more motivated by the intrinsic interest and challenge of their work, and may be more prepared to change employer for professional development.

However, these changes apply equally to people who are not knowledge workers. The new, more inclusive, model of a career ‘recognises both the changed objective realities in which (all) careers are being developed and also the universality of people’s intense involvement with the subjective aspects of their career’ (Arnold and Jackson, 1997).¹

A scheme for structuring career development activity

¹ P.12 et seq.

Being clear about the underlying purposes of career development activities is also important for ensuring that a suitable range of career interventions are put in place. Hirsh et al (1995) suggest that there are five purposes, which apply equally to the individual and the organisation:

- a) Assessment: activities to provide the individual and organisation with the opportunity to learn about the individual's strengths, weaknesses, interests, etc.;
- b) Career options: activities to assist individuals' and their managers' understanding of current and future career and job options;
- c) Action planning: planning of specific, concrete, time-based learning activities by individuals and organisations;
- d) Skill development: activities to promote or deliver skill development;
- e) Vacancy filling: activities designed to manage the internal labour market in line with business needs and organisational culture.

When is career support needed?

Focused career support for key talent groups can be considered as part of an overall people management strategy. As such, it is more likely to be delivered in a proactive manner ahead of major career transitions or at certain career stages (e.g. after entry on a graduate training programme).

There is often less thought given to when other employees need career support. At worst, provision is only reactive i.e. when someone has a major career problem, rather than proactive and educational in its rationale. Best practice aims to get people to think about career issues ahead of time. This is not to say that people should not be given career support when they have a major career issue but rather to emphasise that employers would almost always benefit from giving some thought as to how best to facilitate a more proactive approach to careers being pursued by employees. This is strongly linked to the concept of employability (ensuring one will be employable in the future) and equipping people with the skills they need to manage their careers effectively (Kanter, 1989; Kidd and Killeen, 1992; Jackson, 1996).²

Trends in guidance provision for employed adults

If there is a key trend in the development of guidance provision, it is the move towards self-help strategies. This is true as much in public employment service provision – where, as Sultana and Watts (2006) point out, there has been a major shift to self-service provision, as in provision by employers and in education where many of these self-help services have been pioneered. There have been considerable developments in recent years. It is becoming increasingly clear that these technologies offer cost-effective ways to deliver career development support, especially to employed people, as several case studies show. This is possible because of developments in ICT, which is being used extensively by public employment service, other public sector careers services, employers and others as a vehicle for delivering career development support.

² P.38

Similar web-based offerings are also being made available by employers, by recruitment agencies/websites, virtual communities and professional associations. In fact the thrust in the use of ICT is similar regardless of the provider. Sultana and Watts note four ways that ICT is being used by public employment service:

- a) the development of self- and career-exploration packages,
- b) web-based job search facilities,
- c) web-based registration for job seekers (including CVs),
- d) call-centre technology to access information and counselling.

Clearly self-help requiring the client to work on their own using the Internet is different from the client taking the first step to getting more in-depth career advice by making a telephone call. ICT-based provision is now probably the dominant model for providing career information, advice and guidance to the employed. ICT and websites, in particular, can be used to raise awareness of guidance services and to facilitate peer support as well as for the delivery of career and labour market information and self-help materials.

The fact that there is a significant private-sector presence, with both recruitment agencies and websites, and also specialist providers offering web-based services, can be taken as one indication that there is a market for these kinds of services and also of unmet demand for career advice and support from people in employment. However, it should be noted that there is little current evidence of many individuals paying to use these services. Rather, their use of such services tends to be funded either by employers or the agencies themselves; sometimes, in the case of recruitment agencies, this is to attract candidates to register with them. There would appear to be three main concerns about the multiplicity of ICT-based service offerings:

- a) Quality of services: quality of service is variable and cost of entry into this market, while high for research-based comprehensive and tiered products, is quite low for other more limited products;
- b) Complexity of information needs: many employed adults pursue their careers in specialised labour markets and require highly specific labour market information to support their career decision-making. There is a role for sector-specific initiatives
- c) Access: individuals with a low level of computing skills or access may be excluded from using these services. In some countries bandwidth limitations and cost of Internet access may restrict the range of resources that can be accessed (OECD, 2004). Many ICT-based initiatives have also been developed for stand-alone use (OECD, 2004). This is true both in the public sector and for much private-sector provision. However, these services will not necessarily meet all of a client's needs, and opportunities for referral are often limited.

Call centre technology is being used successfully both in the public sector and by companies to offer more in-depth guidance and support. It is important as an innovation because it promotes easy access to support and has much greater potential reach than many more conventional models of guidance. While it might seem that such approaches can only deliver a highly structured guidance intervention, they appear to have been quite popular with clients and several companies are using call centre technology not only for routine HR management but also as one way to provide more in-depth career support.

This links to a second issue in relation to career development support for employed adults and to self-service models of provision in particular. They tend to assume that users of such services already have the skills required to manage their careers effectively. While some e-guidance materials may have modules designed to impart, or support people in acquiring, the skills needed for career management, others simply use relatively crude matching or searching capabilities.

Alongside the emergence of self-service/self-help provision, there continue to be other forms of career intervention. Personalised services are offered both by public employment services and by employers but in both cases they are frequently targeted at specific groups. Employers are increasingly using coaching models to deliver professional and management development as well as career support to highly valued employees, while public employment services and other guidance providers tend to use more traditional guidance approaches based on interviewing or counselling (often time-limited) with groups regarded as being 'in need'.

Courses and workshops to deliver career support have been extensively adopted in education but have also been used by public employment services and employers. Job clubs are one well-known example for the unemployed but career workshops have also been used by employers both to improve career planning and to develop career management skills. One distinct advantage of such group-based activities is that they encourage peer support.

Once providers offer a range of services there is also an issue about how clients are directed to the most appropriate level for their needs. Often it is simply by referral from one level to another. However, there have been experiments with screening in terms of readiness for decision-making. Research by Sampson et al. (1999) allocates people to one of three levels of readiness. Those judged to have a high level of readiness are referred initially to self-help services; those judged to have a moderate level of readiness might be offered limited staff assistance, such as advice on how to make best use of the available resources; while those with a low level of readiness might be offered more in-depth assistance. Sampson et al. estimated that between 10% and 50% might need in-depth support (depending on the population). There is also the separate, but related, issue of ensuring that people are referred to the most appropriate source of support regardless of their initial point of contact.

The final trend in provision that builds on the value of peer support is recognition of the importance of informal career support. There is evidence that people rely on peers and work colleagues for much information and advice. In organisations, there is also a frequent assumption that an individual's manager has the ability to provide the advice and information that individuals need to manage their careers. While this assumption may be questionable, ignoring the impact of such sources of career support is unrealistic. A better strategy may be to think about how the quality of such informal networks can be enhanced and individuals made aware of how to use them more effectively. There is the opportunity for career professionals to play a significant role in training, supporting and coordinating these informal networks.³

³ P.117 et seq.

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