

In-house advice

Investing in development and training initiatives is essential in maintaining a robust pipeline of talent, but many employees are unsure as to what direction they want to take in their career, and the investment can be wasted. People will take on new roles and responsibilities because they are incentivised to do so, but the reality can sometimes be far from what they imagined, so breeding disengagement and underperformance. Structured and formalised career management can provide employees with the insight into their personal drivers and goals that will enable them to make more informed career decisions, benefiting them and ultimately the company they work for. To reflect this, some businesses have set up dedicated in-house career advice centres to help align employees' motivations with their development and progression - we find out how they achieved this and look at the benefits to be gained from following suit.



Ask your colleague about the careers advice they received at school and you will be answered with an amusing anecdote or a completely incredible and unrealistic suggestion. Whether they were recommended a career as a dental assistant or a tennis coach, very few people took the advice and followed that path. Thankfully careers advice has advanced a great deal, and when addressing executives it needs to take a very different approach to that we fondly remember from school.

When an employee comes to a crossroads in their career, they no longer cut and run from the firm that they have been with for many years, and instead look to their employers for advice, coaching and fresh opportunities. There are many options available to a person as an alternative to leaving the company, and employers are increasingly recognising this as they strive to keep key talent within their organisation. The form a careers advice centre can take may be anything from an intranet site, to a drop-in centre, or even the use of an outplacement firm. Nationwide Building Society offers staff a number of opportunities for discussing their career, as Executive Development Consultant Steve Lassman explains: "We provide an intranet site, which offers clear advice and guidance, and a structured process to all employees. They visit this site to get advice and guidance, which will help them to better manage their career. We also run a series of workshops which staff can opt to attend to get support to work through that same process. Our internal team of trainers run the workshops, and careers advice is just one of the topics they deal with to help staff develop. The workshops are driven by demand - employees book via our intranet site with the approval of their manager."

In-house careers advice centres by their very nature should fall under the remit of HR as an extension of training and development. However, does HR have the technical know-how required to offer individuals career advice? Clayton Glen, Director at consultancy firm HDA Associates, believes that although many HR professionals are adept at career development, as a department they should not be wholly accountable for this task: "The problem with these objectives for many HR functions, is that they lack the technical career coaching expertise to provide optimal and challenging advisory support in this area, and often they are limited by remit, time, confidentiality considerations, employee relations considerations, and internal structural and political limitations which prevents them doing a truly professional job in this area. The career advisory output is limited as a result, and the effect of the service is diluted."

Many would argue this point, saying that external career advisers, although they are skilled in coaching and identifying opportunities for an individual's career development may be disadvantage by their lack of company knowledge. Lassman comments: "It has to be a solution that fits within the culture of the organisation. The advantage of having an external provider come in is that employees may see this as

being more objective, particularly if they value an external perspective, and the service may appear more confidential. The disadvantages are that they may not have the detailed inside knowledge of the organisation and how it works. So there are advantages to both ways."

The information that is shared at a careers centre, whether it is an intranet site or a one-to-one meeting should be confidential. Glen advises: "We would always encourage organisations setting up an in-house career centre to opt to commit to a confidential advisory service for staff using the service – and this should be clearly communicated in FAQs and broader internal marketing communications. The positive implications for opening up with a professional career coach, in a frank, empowering and non-guarded dialogue are obvious."

However, if an organisation is investing time and resources on providing the service, they want to be able to measure their success and the return on their investment. Lassman explains how Nationwide publicises its their careers advice and why: "To some extent we do share our success stories. In our Nationwide Live magazine we often have a history of a person's career, showing how they've developed themselves and worked their way through the company. At the same time, this offers advice. Also, on our career intranet site, we have profiles of people, offering advice and insight into how they've developed their career."

In a troubled economy, redundancy is unfortunately a common occurrence. However in recognising that they will not always match the need for specific talent with an individual's skills, organisations extend their careers advice offering to outplacement services. Lassman comments: "Nationwide has a very strong sense of responsibility for its employees, and while we hope the careers support we provide will help develop people who stay with the business in the long-term, we also appreciate the benefit this support offers employees who consider

pursuing their careers elsewhere. For other employers I can understand how this kind of careers support and advice would help smooth the transition for any staff in redundancy situations."

Owen Morgan, Head of Commercial Operations at Penna's Career Transition division, agrees that careers advice should encompass outplacement in a period of restructuring: "Redundancies are inevitably an unsettling experience for all parties involved. However, there are steps that businesses can take to equip their people with the skills and confidence they need to find new employment. Career transition consultants can work with employees to help them polish their CVs, offer workshop sessions designed to help with interview techniques, and conduct skills 'audits' to help them reassess their strengths – all of which will help point them in the direction of a new role."

Morgan continues: "People are an organisation's biggest asset, and if they are looked after through the bad times, they are highly likely to become advocates of the business even after they leave – this is particularly important, as they could become future customers or clients."

It's one way in which the organisation can recognise that this is a difficult time for employees, that we're actually providing this help to make that transition easier for them, and we recognise our responsibility

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