Leveraging Technology to Improve Satisfaction with Career Management

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Having engaged employees is critical for driving organizational performance. Yet satisfaction with career development is often one of the lowest rated employee survey items. This is because employees are expected to take charge of their own careers, supported by guidance from their managers. However, managers often do not have the skills, information, time, or motivation to support employee career development. In recent years, though, technology advances have made it possible to provide just-in-time career coaching via video and self-guided instruction. Furthermore, finding mentors or learning how others developed their careers can be discovered via technology using skill or key word matching. Simply put, technology can fill the gap that managers have not been able to fill to provide greater support for career development.

As companies try to do more with less, having engaged employees who are willing to put forth their discretionary effort in their work is critical for driving organizational performance. Discretionary effort reflects the initiative an employee will take to go above and beyond day-to-day job requirements in order to meet or exceed customer expectations, assist co-workers in getting work accomplished, and achieve company goals. Several research studies have indicated that one of the leading predictors of employee engagement is employee satisfaction with career growth and development. Yet, satisfaction with career growth and development is often one of the lowest rated areas in employee surveys (BlessingWhite, 2011; Goldberg, 2012; Towers Perrin, 2008). Companies with engaged employees have 3.9 times the earnings per share (EPS) growth rate compared to organizations in the same industry with lower engagement (Harter, J.K, Agrawal, S., Plowman, S., and Asplund, J., 2010). Given the relationship between employee engagement and company performance, as well as the fact that satisfaction with career management is a leading indicator of employee engagement, we can see how important the career management process is to organizational performance.

If this fact were not enough to get us to sit up and take notice of the career management process in our companies, the impending talent shortage should get us to notice the urgency in this issue. Companies need new ways to attract and retain employees to execute on their business strategy. Employees have made it clear that satisfaction with career growth is important to them when selecting an employer and is a leading factor in employee retention. So, it is important that companies get ahead of this issue to ensure that they will have the talent they need for the future.

Importantly, the newest entrants into the workforce, Millennials, have made it very clear that they expect to grow their careers quickly. This is a generation that has grown up being told that they are special, they can do whatever they want to do, and they can be whatever they want to be, so these expectations naturally carry over into the workplace. It is more important than ever that we help employees understand the skills and experiences required to perform at different levels in the organization and help them gain those experiences over time.

The Organizational Challenge – Fewer Opportunities for Advancement

But, while employees are clamoring for more growth opportunities, there are significantly fewer opportunities to advance because organizations have gotten flatter as a result of the delayering that has occurred over the past 10 years. This delayering has reduced the number of management positions and has had the effect of making each level of management a job that is significantly larger in scope. This makes it harder for an employee to simply advance up a career ladder. Now, an employee must take a career detour to gain new experiences that provide the employee with the breadth of perspective required at the next level of management. This is a major reason for the recent discussions about the need for more lateral career moves. Thus, we have relatively new terms in career management such as the career lattice, career web, or perhaps the mosaic of our career – adding on experiences through job variety rather than advancing up to create a career. It would be helpful for organizations to change their language to reflect the changes that have occurred in how careers progress. No longer do we “climb the corporate ladder.” That ladder broke when the rungs spread so far apart that you could not simply “step up.” Instead we should talk about career growth in terms of gaining new experiences and leveraging one’s talents in new ways.

Because there are fewer opportunities to move up in the company, managers need to help employees navigate their career and find the experiences that will be helpful in achieving their ultimate career objectives. This requires more planning than simply waiting for the position above you to open up. This means one might expect that careers of the 21st century require more assistance from managers than ever before. However, managers are busy and they do not have the bandwidth to help each of their employees.

Current Processes Fall on the Manager’s Plate – Which is Full

Most companies today embrace the Career Self-Reliance philosophy, which was developed in the mid-1990s (Waterman, Waterman, & Collard, 1994). This philosophy
broadly states that “the employee owns his/her career, the manager helps to facilitate, and the organization provides resources to support the employee’s efforts.” The problem with this definition is that it relies on the manager to facilitate the process when managers are not skilled or even motivated to do this.

In 2011, E. L. Goldberg & Associates conducted a benchmarking study with 34 highly respected companies in a wide variety of industries to understand trends and best practices in career management. They found that almost 20 percent of the participating companies had no career discussion process in place. Where it was in place, most companies said it was not well-structured and the quality of the experience was completely dependent on the manager. So, if it is all dependent on the manager, then we must ask how we have supported the manager in this process. Only 26 percent of the companies participating in the benchmark study indicated that they provide training to managers on how to have career discussions. Only one company said they have training to help managers learn how to craft development opportunities. And, this could be a highly value-added process. So, given that our managers are neither skilled, nor held accountable to have quality career conversations with their employees, how can we help employees manage their careers in a way that is less dependent on their manager and cost effective?

**Provide Alternatives to Manager-Driven Career Development**

A traditional alternative to manager-dependent career development processes is one-on-one career coaching; however, providing a coach to every employee is cost-prohibitive for most organizations. Another more cost effective and scalable approach may be to provide a technology solution that will alleviate the burden of career coaching from the manager and instead empower employees to drive their own careers. Tools that would allow employees to learn at their own pace, network with colleagues that match their career interests, and define their own career path would be valuable in providing career development opportunities that many employees are calling for. An online career development tool must provide an engaging and valuable experience at every level, creating autonomy, engagement, and a sense of control, all the while helping employees to take their career into their own hands.

**Offer Easily Accessible Career Coaching**

At every level, coaching provides an experience of internal reflection and exploration, identification of a desired outcome, creation of actionable goals based on desired outcomes, and a high level of accountability. While a brilliant coach is worth the high price tag, most organizations are not willing or able to bear the cost of providing that experience to every employee. However, an online tool that can guide employees through a unique and personalized experience would create a similar environment to that of the career coach, while being much more cost effective. Individuals could begin to learn to coach themselves through a series of videos, webinars, interactive activities and suggested action steps. When that one-on-one human interaction is critical to help employees talk through possibilities and ask questions specific to industries or roles, tools that help employees find appropriate mentors can be valuable.

**Utilize Mentors in Successful Career Development Processes**

Research has shown that mentoring can benefit organizations by reducing turnover, increasing organizational commitment, promoting knowledge transfer, and making earlier identification of key talent (Hegstad, 1999; Ragins, Cotton & Miller, 2000). Despite those benefits, managers are typically not skilled at having career conversations – and are often unmotivated to do so. However, in mentoring relationships, mentors are ideally motivated to work with mentees. Specifically, a career mentor would help the mentee define career goals and paths, using the rich experience they bring from their own careers. The technology exists to help employees find mentors who either have the skills an individual wants to develop (through skill matching) or who have achieved success in a career to which the individual aspires (by searching for people based on titles). Today, employees are more likely to have several mentors who serve different needs, e.g., one to help with navigating the organizational politics and another for improving their ability to communicate to a broad audience on complex issues, rather than just one mentor. Technology can help facilitate finding the right mentors and can provide just-in-time tips and tools for building a successful mentor/mentee relationship. While there is no arguing that the manager-employee relationship will remain critical to individual employee’s success within an organization, encouraging employee-mentor relationships will alleviate the burden of an employee’s individual career development needs on the manager and create a richer and broader experience for the employee.

**Find Career Growth through New Experiences**

As mentioned above, an employee’s perceived control over their career management is key to driving engagement and an important aspect of career management is career planning. Through self-exploration, mentoring or both, employees can discover new skills and experiences that should be acquired to realize personal career development goals. But, how should they go about obtaining experiences to build the skills they need? Studies have shown that about 70 to 80 percent of what we learn at work is from “on-the-job” learning or informal learning (Dobbs, 2000; Cross, 2006). Therefore, organizations need to facilitate processes that allow employees to find opportunities to develop new skills and build new experiences that will enhance their career development. One of the easiest ways to create this environment would be to encourage managers to use existing employees to fill their project-based needs, such as covering for someone on leave or vacation, or filling in for projects that might otherwise be farmed out to a short-term contractor. With today’s lean organizations, there are certainly many projects leaders would like to do, but get put off because of the lack of resources. These special projects could serve as
excellent opportunities for employees to stretch themselves and learn new skills or gain new experiences. In addition, expanding skillsets can help raise the overall knowledge base of a company, making that company more poised to meet future challenges.

Employees who are given special opportunities to develop themselves and gain new skills will become more engaged at work and, thus, put forth more discretionary effort toward these special projects and their day-to-day work and, ultimately, experience more job satisfaction. In fact, a 2012 SHRM survey showed that opportunities to use skills and abilities replaced job security as the number one influencer of job satisfaction. Technology can once again help employees get access to these developmental experiences through a system similar to a job posting system, albeit for short-term opportunities or gigs.

Conclusion

Nearly 75 percent of the companies participating in the benchmarking study cited previously (Goldberg, 2011) said that satisfaction with career management was one of the lowest scoring items in their employee engagement survey. Current career management practices have made managing careers less central to organizational management practice, placing most of the responsibility on the employee. Managers are supposed to provide support for the employee’s efforts, yet they are neither trained in how to do this, nor are they rewarded for spending their time on this important task. So, we need a solution for how to help employees without relying on the skills or interest of their manager.

The business landscape has changed and the needs and expectations of today’s workforce have evolved. Organizations must keep up through adopting new and innovative methods of engaging, retaining, and supporting their employees. Offering career development support, including career coaching, networking, skill expansion, career planning and mentor opportunities will allow employees to take control of their careers, increase their engagement, expand the knowledge base of your organization, and provide the best possible foundation for continued growth.

A well-structured career coaching and management system can be delivered via technology by leveraging video-based instruction, online skill matching, online assessments, system-guided development planning, posting of temporary assignments for skill growth, and access to development resources, all in one integrated solution. Welcome to the 21st-century solution for career management, where we can rely on technology to fill the gap created by managers with limited capability and capacity.

References


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