

A New Understanding of Career

Traditionally, everyone who wanted to make a career for himself had to make sure that his achievements made a good impression. The new understanding of career, however, does not fit the 'up or out' approach, which was the only way for development and promotion in many companies.

There are two reasons: knowledge workers who strive for continuous self-improvement and innovation do not see their personal objective in promotions to ever-higher levels of management. Qualified and motivated people often want to work in their own areas of expertise without using pre-defined career-paths. On the other hand, the number of management positions has decreased due to lean management and flatter hierarchies. Thus, many companies are not able to offer as many management positions as they had in order to satisfy all employees with ambitions for career.

In the result, companies face a dilemma: they cannot offer as many promotions as necessary and they cannot even be sure that a promoted employee is really happy with his new position. To give people with the ambition to be a technical specialist a promotion into a management position may not have the desired effect in higher motivation and commitment. Another risk is that employees with a traditional career orientation may leave the company to make their fortune somewhere else, if they do not see enough chances for promotion in their employer's flat hierarchies. People who actively plan their career – which includes the willingness to change jobs and employers – have the challenge that they need to have a track record of a successful career development (i.e. promotions) when they apply for a new job. Many personnel departments still look for these traditional career patterns when selecting applicants. In the result, even people who do not really want to make their way into management feel forced to strive for

this traditional career in order to increase their value on the job market.

At Dell, heads of departments are not simply promoted and thus forced to climb the next step up the career ladder. Instead, they are allowed to move into their department of choice where they can add value with their competences.

A side effect of this type of career is the development of organization-wide personal networks and the training of people with cross-functional experiences.

The central precondition for this form of personnel development is that it has to be long-term orientated.

Career and Phases of Life

Not only young employees hope for an individual career that is tailored to their individual needs. According to their phase of life, elder employees develop particular wishes for their next career step too. Whereas the younger ones often strive for higher positions in hierarchy and the chance to prove their capabilities, most elder ones know about their strengths, weaknesses and preferences. In later stages of career, money and power become less important; people are more interested in doing something of lasting value and in sharing their knowledge and experiences. Such people could see their next career step in writing a book, teaching or in working as a consultant for their own employer.

The management of ABB faced a problem before the foundation of ABB Consulting. They did not want to retire experienced managers too early, since they needed their experience and their networks. On the other hand, they needed management positions to provide career opportunities for younger employees. Another factor was the wish of most elder managers to gradually shift into retirement.

The setting up of ABB Consulting was a solution for all these problems. ABB Consulting exclusively employs former ABB top managers aged 60 or above who want to start something new.

Life-Long Learning

To have a satisfying job does not necessarily mean to be responsible for a high budget of a large department today. A job is interesting when it challenges and encourages the person. It is the wealth of tasks and responsibilities in which the employee is really interested, that makes a job a good job.

Ideally, every employee should be self-responsible for his employability together with his employer. This requires people to be dynamic, flexible and self-confident. On the other hand, such a self-responsible workforce means higher competitiveness for the organization in times of rising importance of the factors people and knowledge. The drawback is that characteristics like dynamism, flexibility and self-confidence are not a one-way street. They have a double effect pro and contra the organization. The critical question is no longer how to find a satisfying career path for talented people. The question is how to tailor each job and the career opportunities individually related to each employee's preferences.

The skills needed to do a particular job had changed very slowly until the early eighties. This situation is completely different now due to technological progress and more dynamic changes. The focus of education and training has changed from training young starters to a continuous adult education. Since new technologies (IT, biotec) made change cycles shorter, employees have to learn and to re-learn faster. The only real obstacle for exploiting the potential of new technologies is people's ability (and willingness) to use them.

Economy was determined by natural resources during the industrial age. Today, information is

the critical factor. In contrast, to natural resources, information seems to be infinite. It follows that the bottleneck is the processing of the nearly endless information - to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information. Thus, traditional concepts of education are not effective any more in times of ongoing change. Employees too are responsible for their development. They have to evaluate which courses and training programs are helpful for better fulfilling their tasks.

Education is time-critical in a twofold way: On one side, no employee can afford to spend several days for a training that is only partly relevant for him. On the other hand, the timing of trainings has to guarantee that new knowledge is available when it is needed.

Today many employees appreciate chances for individual and fast personal development through training, promotion, job rotations or whatever they perceive suitable for their preferences. By providing these opportunities, companies can increase loyalty and commitment, thus keeping their most valuable resources in house.

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