

Showing employees the way

Career paths, near extinct in the downsizing era of 1990s, are making a comeback

BY BARBARA KOFMAN
AND KAITLIN ECKLER

In the early 1980s, the companies most admired by HR professionals were the ones moving away from the paternalistic employee practices of the past and focusing on groundbreaking work in manpower planning and creating innovative career-path programs.

The companies at the vanguard were the ones that recognized and implemented far-reaching strategies to develop and nurture their human resources. They were the ones with visionary leaders who understood the return on investment of a productive and engaged workforce long before any of these terms crept into the everyday lexicon of HR.

Then came the lean and mean 1990s where the bottom line ruled the day, often at the expense of programs that explicitly supported the employee. Organizations with reputations of excellence for their HR practices began cutting them,

along with their staff. And the days of the covenant between the employee and employer, with its understanding of the symbiotic relationship that sustained both parties, were all but lost.

In the era of downsizing the watchword became "employability" and individuals were told they alone were responsible for their own career development.

Employers should be grateful for the emergence, in this era, of the ever-growing number of top 50 or 100 lists of best companies for which to work. While one might occasionally challenge their validity, the measurements of excellence that have been used to determine who qualifies have doubtless contributed to a re-emergence of the recognition, by organizations, of the importance of supporting, nurturing and growing employees within their ranks.

Furthermore, metrics such as the high cost of turnover (conventionally pegged at 200 per cent of an-

nual salary at the senior level) and the growing demographic shifts that are forcing employers to once again consider how to attract and retain employees, are causing savvy employers to revisit and renew some of these old practices, but with a new twist.

Canada Post's transformational journey

Canada Post is one of the organizations that have taken a second look at these processes in order to create new ways to support and advance its staff.

Lynn Palmer, vice-president of HR, speaks of a huge transformational journey at Canada Post. Employee engagement has become a top priority, along with the need to replenish its 72,000-strong workforce, with an average age of 48, through leadership training, career and team incentive programs. A key part of the strategy has been to position the senior management team to attract top university talent while also promoting career-pathing opportunities and the solid business brand.

University of Toronto focuses on mentoring

The University of Toronto, which employs 12,000

people and which made the 2006 list of Canada's Top 100 Employers, has also been actively involved in developing and implementing resourceful and highly successful programs that provide staff with clear options on how to manage careers. Since 1998 it has had an innovative and highly effective mentoring program that provides the opportunity for employees to apply for consideration. Those selected are paired with more senior employees who nurture them through a year-long program of development and broaden their exposure to, and competitiveness for, the opportunities available at the university.

Over one-third of the participants successfully change roles during their mentoring term. In addition, this program has the benefit of expanding each participant's grasp of the needs of the university as a whole and has acted as a catalyst in breaking down the silos that have existed between departments.

Nevertheless, in this large, complex organization, where there are many different job opportunities, the reality is that it is not easy for a lot of employees

See Next Page

■ EMPLOYEE CAREER MANAGEMENT

Laying out the possibilities

Continued From Previous Page

to navigate between departments and be regarded as a credible applicant. The university's HR offices are inundated with more than 30,000 resumé's every year, making it imperative for anyone who wants to be seriously considered to know how to position themselves as a viable candidate.

To facilitate this process, the university has developed a number of programs to support the variety of career paths available at the university. It also put in place a pioneering "career fitness" curriculum, which incorporates a large amount of information on its website to help employees assess the ways they fit into the myriad jobs at the university. There's even a series of career development workshops that allow for more in-depth evaluation of this information and the option to obtain one-on-one coaching to facilitate transitions. The outcome for employees and the employer can be measured by a low turnover rate — less than seven per cent — and a tangible sense of employee loyalty.

"While as a publicly-funded institution it would be easy for the university to cut services of this kind during times of budget restraint, there is clear recognition that as an institution of higher learning, it's im-

portant to 'walk the talk,'" said Rosie Parnass, director of organizational and staff development at the University of Toronto. "As well, it is implicitly understood that if the quality of work life for the staff is improved, then they will do their work better and provide their customers, the students, with an enhanced experience."

Parnass is a beneficiary of the kind of flexibility and support this approach of-

In this large, complex organization, where there are many different job opportunities, it is not easy for employees to navigate between departments.

fers. She began her career in student services and then transferred to HR, working her way up gradually by experiencing the different cultures of the various university campuses. Throughout this time, she expanded her knowledge of the university, gained connections and built a reputation that positioned her well when new opportunities were posted. She acknowledged that "not everyone has learned how to properly leverage the opportunities presented within this system," but said that "for many, these programs have provided the facility to grow and learn while staying within the university, thus preventing, in the main, the

loss of expertise that happens when organizations consistently experience high turnover."

When asked about the changes in the way organizations have managed employee expectations for growth and opportunity over the past couple of decades, Bernard Cormier, an industry leader and vice-president of HR at Home Depot, summarized where things are by reflecting on his own organization.

"You cannot just wake up one day and expect to plug in organizational development programs. It must be a core business strategy," said Cormier. "The basics are the same, but now everything is more compressed with less time and (fewer) layers, and therefore career ladders have fewer rungs."

Home Depot builds future with succession planning

At Home Depot, which employs 23,000 people and has Canadian head offices in Toronto, talent development consists of an infrastructure focused on succession planning and leadership development, he said.

"We have training, coaching and mentoring programs. And (we) work the program with discipline, using robust 360-degree assessment tools, beyond the anecdotal, and hold people accountable," said Cormier. "Expectations are higher, and there is less time to get it done while doing more and more. We expect a lot and give a lot and put our resources where it counts — behind our people."

In resilient and thriving organizations, there is renewed appreciation of the business imperative to support employees and to let them know they are valued. The hands-off model that has prevailed is being replaced with a pragmatic approach that, while recognizing career management as the individual's responsibility, also acknowledges that it is the company's responsibility to develop and manage its talent by providing a variety of opportunities and systems to enable employees to achieve their best.

Barbara Kofman of CareerTrails and Kaitlin Eckler of KE&A are career management consultants who specialize in working out individual and organizational career-related challenges. They are both members of the Association of Career Professionals International, Toronto Chapter. Barbara can be reached at (416) 708-2880 or at www.careertrails.com and Kaitlin can be reached at (416) 579-1508 or at career@sympatico.ca.