

Employee Engagement Begins With an Effective Career Framework

Keep your employees engaged by giving them a road map.

Employees engage with their organizations in many ways: socially with one another, intellectually through job challenges and culturally through the mission and values of the institution. In the authors' experience, one HR initiative touches all three and, consequently, is an indispensable building block for employees' attachments to the organization: the establishment of a career framework.

At the micro level, the virtues of career frameworks are well known. Organizations that have a career framework (see "What Is a Career Framework?" on page 52) have found they are able to:

- Give employees a realistic view of their career expectations
- Decrease the number of job evaluations and reward employees for improving their skills rather than winning another promotion

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What Is a Career Framework?

A career framework comprises:

- A specific and clearly communicated organizational career philosophy
- Well-defined and cross-organizationally related jobs
- A set of guidelines that show employees how they can move into and across jobs, assuming they meet certain requirements
- Guidance and training for managers regarding how to have effective career development discussions. The career framework is highly responsive to business needs and, ultimately, supports overall employee career development and progression readiness.

A well-designed career framework functions as a guiding strategy for development and as a tool that sets the stage for when an employee's preparation for advancement coincides with the business's opportunities and needs. The career framework is the realization of the organization's career-progression philosophy and reflects the business context in which progression is set. In turn, it provides the tools and resources required to address the career-progression needs of the organization and its employees. It is designed to make effective use of employees' capabilities in conjunction with the evolving needs of the business. It is not a program, however, that guarantees an automatic path to promotions.

- Help employees develop not just their strengths but their opportunities
- Enable and encourage meaningful career conversations that increase employee involvement. Less appreciated in building career frameworks are the organizational changes that occur as byproducts. A strong career framework underscores a culture of continuous improvement, it encourages employees to stretch their capabilities and take initiative for greater responsibility, and it instills an ethic of mentorship and mutual assistance where job-related personal development becomes the focus of organizational advancement. Employees' natural desires for meaningful social interactions and intellectual stimulation coalesce within a culture that supports curiosity, accountability and growth. In essence, there is nothing more central to the vitality of an organization than the creation of a sound career system.

Realistic Expectations, Fairness and Consistency

Giving employees a realistic view of their career expectations requires a career philosophy, a description of how the organization approaches career development and what that means for its employees. This philosophy, which should be a part of the career framework and communicated to all employees, will build a common understanding

of what kind of career movement is realistic and is expected within the organization. It is important to note an organization's career philosophy can evolve over time and may even differ in various parts of the organization. This is likely appropriate; however, the key is that the philosophy is communicated clearly in each part of the organization so that the expectation of what a career means is realistic. Sample career philosophies are shown in Figure 1; these philosophies may apply to the entire organization or a specific segment or function.

In addition to helping employees understand their career expectations, having a career framework improves morale by promoting fairness and consistency. It does this by:

- Establishing consistent criteria about what employees need to do to progress. It should be clear to everyone what the requirements are across all levels and that they are consistently applied. In some instances, progression may involve movement from one level to the next. In others, progression can mean moving laterally within the organization.
- Conveying that not everyone can expect to attain a top leadership position. Opportunities generally decrease as people rise within the natural organizational pyramid. However, high-potential employees will be clear about the requirements for higher-level positions, which will help them

prepare and position themselves for future opportunities.

Pay for Growth

Many organizations complain that they spend too much time conducting job evaluations and reviewing managers' recommendations for employee promotions or suffer from constant requests for re-evaluations. In many instances, managers see the re-evaluation process as the only way to increase employee pay beyond the traditional merit increase process. In addition to being time-consuming for the organization's compensation group, this can create a culture in which too many employees are promoted, which can eventually destroy the shape of the organizational pyramid.

Having a career framework allows organizations to shift some of the time and money they allot to evaluating jobs to paying for growth by encouraging employee development. Instead of paying employees based on changes to their jobs, they are paid for expanding their competencies and skills within their current position. The concept of paying for growth can be adapted to any type of compensation structure. For example, within a broadbanded pay structure, paying for growth could be in the form of in-band promotions

that provide increases for acquiring new skills and competencies.

It is important to note that paying for growth does not have to increase the organization's compensation budget. The money is just reallocated. (See Figure 2 on page 54.) Moreover, growth costs less than promotions, which usually entail larger percentage increases.

Developing Strengths and Opportunities

Some organizations and/or managers encourage their employees to focus solely on their strengths. For example, an employee who is good at communication, analytical thinking and collaboration is placed in a job that uses those strengths and is encouraged to develop only in those areas. There may be matters like project management or team leadership that are not strengths for the employee but are important in order to progress within the organization. Employees who base their development plans solely on their areas of strength will fail to build broader capabilities.

Having a career framework that outlines the competencies and requirements of specific jobs or career paths encourages organizations to help employees focus on their strengths and their

opportunities, which creates a growth mindset. This not only helps employees perform better in their current jobs and prepare for future positions, it allows the organization to meet its business needs.

Meaningful Career Conversations and Employee Involvement

A well-designed career framework will ensure that managers receive the tools and the training they need to use the organization's career framework in career conversations with employees. As many managers have discovered, it is easy to make mistakes, such as appearing to promise a promotion or a raise that fails to materialize. Manager support can include toolkits that are geared to their specific employees, training and practice; talking points to use in career development conversations; and follow-up support.

A career framework helps employees develop realistic expectations by giving them the opportunity to learn what the authors call the career truth. This requires frank conversations that balance an employee's strengths and opportunities for advancement with any gaps in his/her requirements for development.

While people may not like the truth, they like to know it. In addition,

Figure 1 | Sample Career Philosophies

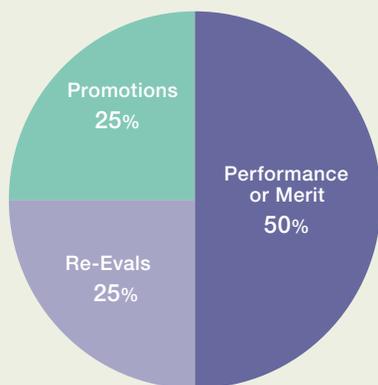
| Philosophy | Description | Organizational Examples |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Long-term retention | The organization keeps employees in jobs, which are gradually expanded. | Call center employees the organization wants to stay as long as possible because of the high cost of retraining. Although the jobs remain basically the same, they are designed to give employees the opportunity to grow in the position. |
| Vertical movement | The organization develops employees to prepare them for future jobs in the same job family or function. | Scientific and technical employees in operations like technology, engineering and architecture firms may be expected to move vertically. Employees continue to develop their expertise within a specific area. |
| Lateral movement | The organization develops employees to prepare them for jobs in other areas of the organization. | Pharmaceutical or large-scale manufacturing operations are examples of organizations that tend to promote this type of movement. To reach the leadership levels, employees are expected to understand all parts of the business (e.g., sales, operations, research and development). |
| Up and out | The organization develops employees with the knowledge that they may eventually leave. | Trade and other types of associations may have more limited career movement opportunities within their organizations. It may be accepted or desired that employees exit and work for a member organization after gaining experience in the association. |

Source: Sibson Consulting

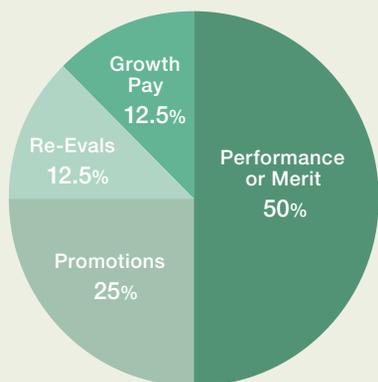
A career framework provides employees and managers with the tools they need to have meaningful conversations about development.

Figure 2 | Compensation Budget – Paying for Re-Evaluations Compared With Paying for Growth

Paying for Re-Evaluations: Job-Focused



Paying for Growth: People-Focused



Source: Sibson Consulting

employees who know their career truth feel empowered to own their career development. This occurs when employees who understand their opportunities and the standards they must meet to be promoted are supported by leaders and managers who encourage employee training and development. Employees can then own their development by:

- Self-identifying the skills they need to advance
- Looking for opportunities to develop knowledge, skills and proper behavior
- Requesting stretch assignments, as appropriate
- Asking for feedback.

A career framework provides employees and managers with the tools they need to have meaningful conversations about development. Managers have objective information to communicate with employees about current and future opportunities, and employees are able to play an active role in preparing themselves for those opportunities.

Conclusion

Implementing a career framework provides organizations with an all-encompassing solution to many struggles companies may face. It helps encourage realistic career expectations among employees,



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creates a sense of fairness and consistency, and supports a culture of opportunity, development and high performance.

Managers are better prepared for employee career conversations. Finally, employees who understand their career truth are in a better position to own their development, stay engaged and be ready when their preparation meets business opportunity. **W**

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