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Frozen pipelines - keeping successors on ice

How do you retain ambitious talent that has nowhere to go?

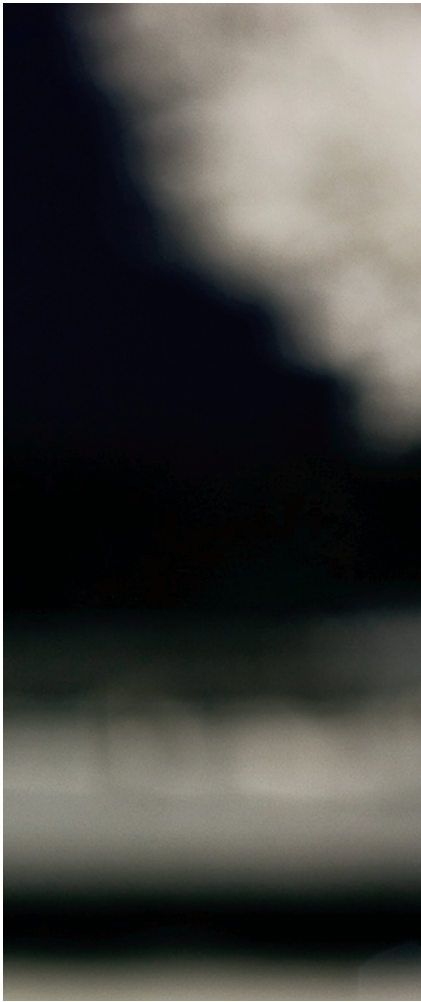
Succession planning is one of the foundations of talent management. It is a sensible safety net for the incumbent leaders and an incentive, a reward and a tie to the organisation for those individuals on the talent pipeline. However, talent pipelines are not without their consequences. For ambitious and dynamic talent they are the ladder to success, but only as long as there are positions to move into.

With the recession having stalled many development plans, organisations with projects shelved indefinitely are finding themselves having to retain progressive talent, despite there being no positions into which they can progress. A recent study from SHL suggested that half the UK's workforce were staying in a job they didn't like, but not for long. As most talent tends to make itself known, it is of vital importance that these leading members of the

organisation are seen to be setting an example, both in terms of progressing within the business and application to their current role.

"Only 53% of people say they feel valued," says Sean Howard, VP of Solutions at SHL, "despite them probably doing more work than ever. That's concerning with the customer service angle – every piece of business is critical, but the key is the impact on retention. The link between engagement and performance means that you are losing performance today and future, perhaps better, performance from those on the pipeline.

"One of the sad things is that organisations consider motivation to be a question of money too often; there is lots of research that suggests that pay-for-performance plans do more damage than good. The bigger question is over the minimum you can do."



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So what can be done by HR to retain ambitious talent with no place to go? “I don't believe in a completely dependent culture,” says Gerry Miles, Head of Talent at Capgemini consultancy, “everyone has a responsibility to look after their own career – but high achievers tend to be quite motivated anyway. The ultimate responsibility is corporate.”

“You can't put people in the deep freeze; very able people by their nature are mobile and will move on. Trying to play the card that if you want it it is down to you wears out quickly, and you can't expect people to buy into that forever. You don't have any alternative but to act.”

Despite numerous large organisations still struggling to embrace succession planning, there are several obvious options available to the talent manager, from lateral moves and individual postings to secondments, volunteering, stretch assignments and one-off projects. Sabbaticals or career breaks can be used to minimise the talent's sense of inertia and build some tangential skills in the process. Of course, the individual needs to see how these projects tie into their career – as an opportunity rather than a chore.

According to Caroline Curtis, Head of Talent, Development and Performance at Santander, businesses need to change the way staff see their contribution and actively promote a view of success and progression away from 'upwards' moves. “Talent should be encouraged to make a different and broader contribution,” she explains, “in a culture where there

is an expectation that good people are happy to learn, flexible, and mobile – geographically and functionally.”

If there is sufficient support for the idea of this 'career playground' and for those individuals on the succession plan, these assignments can work brilliantly. “Lots of organisations just increase the role and scope of their rising talent with business-as-usual tasks, loading them up so that they are too busy to talk to headhunters,” says Miles, “but that is a risk. You can only take that so far, extra work is not a motivation. What is better is to have the role increased into making future changes, unfettered by day-to-day grinds.”

Although actively relocating also far from risk-free, placing an individual into a bespoke task with obvious direction from senior teams and an obvious benefit to be derived for the entire organisation can be of immense value. The corporate goal being achieved – the task itself – is one outcome, but so is the exposure to the broader strategic context, and often along with it exposure to the top strategic thinkers that the rising talent may be waiting to work alongside.

All these initiatives are a case of buying time, however. Although obvious expenditure in time and resources goes a long way to showing an awareness of value, the tough reality is that if your talent is ambitious enough, it will want to go up, or out.

SHL has noticed a larger-than-expected uptake on its motivational questionnaire – bucking the trend of >>



limiting external expenditure during a recession. Although some businesses are clearly taking motivation seriously, such concern is far from ubiquitous. "Recognition and public praise are great motivators, and are just not addressed," says Howard, "our basic, minimum fix is to recognise and talk to talented people, remind them of the values of the company, work out what motivates them and re-establish what they want and aspire to. Unfortunately, a lot of managers don't feel equipped to motivate people still in the organisation, they lack simple training and have no diagnostics."

What is most important in any succession plan is communication, both so the talent knows the likelihood of any opportunities and so that the HR strategist can plan for anyone without the time or patience to wait. Such openness is crucial to avoid situations where it appears waiting successors have been overlooked. As Howard explains, "it is these, the best individuals, who need to be engaged. If you are going to spend money anywhere, they are the ones you should be sorting out first. If you know your high potentials are unhappy, and why, the worst thing you can do is send a generic engagement questionnaire to them, yet this still happens."

Of course, the talent itself has a responsibility for seeking out opportunities. It's not merely a case of surrendering responsibility for career development – unless there is a phenomenal central resource staff in active roles are far more likely to be aware of possibilities for job enrichment or extra responsibility than isolated HR practitioners. Vincent Belliveau, EMEA General Manager for Cornerstone OnDemand, explains that one way of encouraging talent to take responsibility for its own development without handing in their notice is to allow them to access data on the organisation's skills requirements. "You could have a role for an account manager to go to be a regional manager, or a branch manager, or anything like that," he explains. "The person in that role today could see those paths, and be able to compare what they have, what the organisation say the role needs, and automatically request the training that is needed for the role they prefer."

This can also avoid singling out anyone as high potential – potentially disengaging underperforming talent elsewhere in the organisation, says Belliveau. "On the one side is that labelling, top-down way, and on the other the self-service model, with an engagement effect for the whole workforce as well as the waiting talent, where everyone maps out their own career path and nobody is singled out by management as the next in line. If someone has invested and engaged with the system, the more attached they get and the more likely they are to progress. Knowing that, seeing others, they are more likely to stay."


Emma Smallwood, a consultant at Independent, agrees

that less of a top-down approach can help. "The fact is," she says, "if they are involved in their development then they are much more likely to want to follow it through." Though perhaps too obvious to state, or maybe too late for those caught out by the economy, letting talent in on the lack of options can also avoid raising anyone's hopes in the first place. As Smallwood notes, "making promises you can't keep is one of the best ways of turning people off the organisation."

The organisational culture and the attitudes towards lateral moves and stop-gaps must clearly reflect the reality of the situation, and even with the economy improving each individual must be realistic about their ambitions in the context. Not that you should avoid positive communication to potential top talent, says Miles. "Risk-averse people say they don't want to tell people and build up their hopes. I don't buy that," he says, "the bigger risk is the other people around them who don't understand why one individual is apparently getting better treatment. The advantages outweigh the disadvantages and, unless you are quite explicit, people will think that you have nothing in mind for them. Ignorance is not bliss from that point of view."

Concerns surrounding retention are inherent to succession planning – they will never go away and engagement needs to be viewed as a question of maintenance rather than a solution. Succession planning and career management are entwined and, although it is up to the individual to develop themselves, it is the organisation's responsibility to keep both threads wound together, ensuring that the development of the talent develops the organisation as well.

Keeping talent 'on ice' demands a careful balance of individual responsibility and freedom along with top-down, formal recognition. If there are no obvious posts then a targeted development plan is the next best thing – with talent on paths clearly aligned to where the business appears to be going you can maximise the chance that, when opportunities do come up, the company's internal talent will be ready to move up or across.

It must be remembered though that a large part of succession is waiting, and perhaps wildly impatient talent is not sufficiently focused on the business to be considered talent at all. Though losing great individuals is painful, succession planning is concerned with the organisational need: nobody is bigger than the team. Miles agrees: "Ultimately, it is about the survival of the organisation. You may have to accept that talent wants to go, but in leaving they open up opportunity for other people to come out of the woodwork, so it is not all doom and gloom. It is about keeping the pool stocked, and though that may not be what the individuals want to hear, it isn't actually about them." 

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