

Does Career Planning Rock the Boat?

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Is individual career planning consistent with the objectives and practices of a well-managed business? Or does it "rock the boat?" Many executives support career planning as a worthwhile concept but fear that implementation of a formal career planning program will raise expectations, increase turnover, burden supervisors and imply a management commitment to career development that is not realistic. This article examines the risks in career planning and outlines a program that minimizes these risks while achieving the desired benefits.

What Is Career Planning?

Career planning is the personal process of planning one's life work. It entails evaluating abilities and interests, considering alternative career opportunities, establishing career goals and planning practical development activities. The process results in decisions to enter a certain occupation, join a particular company, accept or decline job opportunities (relocations, promotions or transfers, etc.) and ultimately leave a company for another job or for retirement.

Some companies have responded to employee desires for assistance in career planning by introducing formal programs. These programs typically include:

- career counseling by personnel staff or by supervisors
- group workshops to help employees evaluate their skills, abilities and interests and to formulate development plans
- self-directed workbooks aimed at guiding career planning and analysis by the individual
- communication of job opportunities through job posting, videotapes, reading materials, publications, etc.

To date, most career planning programs have been experimental and of limited scope. Many employers have been reluctant to intervene in matters such as personal assessments, life planning and career

goal setting. Accordingly, most corporate career planning programs have been limited to work-related matters that:

- help employees conduct their own career planning by raising questions that need to be answered and providing information on available opportunities and resources
- guide employees in taking advantage of systems available for career development, such as job posting, performance reviews, training and educational assistance programs
- increase employee confidence in the company's career management and demonstrate to outside parties that the company is concerned with career development particularly for minorities and females.

In some companies programs have been designed for non-exempt employees; in others, for managerial, professional and technical employees. Because of difficulties in extending the programs to smaller units or outlying locations, some companies have limited their career planning programs to major locations, such as headquarters offices. A few companies offer their programs company-wide for all salaried employees. The differences in approaches and participants exist because career planning is new, relative to other personnel programs. At this stage of practice, therefore, a "proper" career planning program is what best fits an organization's needs.

What Are the Risks?

Career planning has both positive and negative effects (see Figure One). However, some executives see only the risks inherent in career planning and none of the potential rewards. These executives feel that career planning raises individual expectations and puts additional strains on personnel systems such as training, educational assistance, in-

ternal placement and job posting, and increases employee anxiety about future work in relation to personal interests, abilities and goals.

In some companies, supervisors are concerned that career planning will increase their work loads by requiring them to provide counseling and on-the-job development. Many already feel burdened by other personnel programs (appraisals, employee interviewing and selection procedures, job descriptions, etc.) and other administrative demands (budgeting, salary administration, etc.).

Career planning may also lead to greater employee demand for career development resources. Participants in career planning programs rely on the company for training, educational assistance (tuition reimbursement) and staff counseling. In addition, employees may request more information on job vacancies, pay practices and career opportunities.

It is also feared that raised expectations may increase employee anxiety. Fundamental questions regarding individual strengths, weaknesses and goals sometimes are raised for the first time. Group workshops, workbooks and counseling rarely equip an individual to deal adequately with these issues. Accompanying the expectation that life somehow will be different is general anxiety about the uncertainty of career decisions and future events.

Anxiety caused by raised expectations can be beneficial if it leads to increased employee motivation. But some executives believe that unfulfilled expectations can lead only to employee disappointment and reduced commitment to the organization. As a result, some employees may slack off and others may seek work elsewhere.

Why Get Involved?

In spite of these concerns, companies are developing and implementing career planning programs. Pressures for company-sponsored programs have emerged from several sources:

- High-talent candidates (particularly minorities and females) often give preference to employers who can demonstrate that career advancement opportunities do exist.
- Women, employees in mid-career and college recruits in particular are asking for career planning assistance. Popular publications have raised employee awareness of the need for career planning.

- Affirmative Action programs and court-approved settlements of discrimination suits frequently require companies to set up career development programs for protected classes.
- Company growth and changing staffing requirements necessitate individual career development to help assure that needed talent will be available.

Some companies have adopted career planning programs to reduce turnover, improve the "quality of working life," help minimize the chance of white-collar unionization and improve on-the-job performance.

Others have initiated career planning programs specifically to help those employees whose career expectations are too *low*. These companies have found that it is in their own interest as well as the employee's interest to stimulate career aspirations toward more ambitious career goals—to actually *raise* employee expectations. In fact, several companies have focused on "achievement motivation training" as a central component of career planning workshops.

Career planning can be useful, yet at the same time risky, as shown in Figure One. Companies that have pioneered in introducing career planning, including such major corporations as Gulf Oil, IBM, General Electric, Xerox, TRW and General Motors, have sought to minimize the risks of "rocking the boat" while obtaining the desired benefits.

Building More Realistic Expectations

The key to effective career planning appears to lie in developing *more realistic—not raised*—career expectations. Companies that have been successful in their career planning efforts have guided employees toward opportunities and resources that are actually available.

Moreover, they have tried to dispel the "up or out" notion of a career. After all, an employee need not feel it necessary to be promoted to "get ahead." Lateral careers and careers within specialized job areas or locations can be attractive to many employees, and this can be a significant element of realistic career planning. Promotional opportunities are, by definition, limited in a hierarchical organization. If career information focuses on personal development, work content and job importance rather than on promotability, potential and career

ladders, career planning can help create more realistic career expectations and help minimize career dissatisfaction.

As shown in Figure One, realistic expectations lead to clarification of supervisors' roles and career development responsibilities, more effective employee use of a company's career development system and strengthened individual abilities to carry out career planning in a practical, meaningful way.

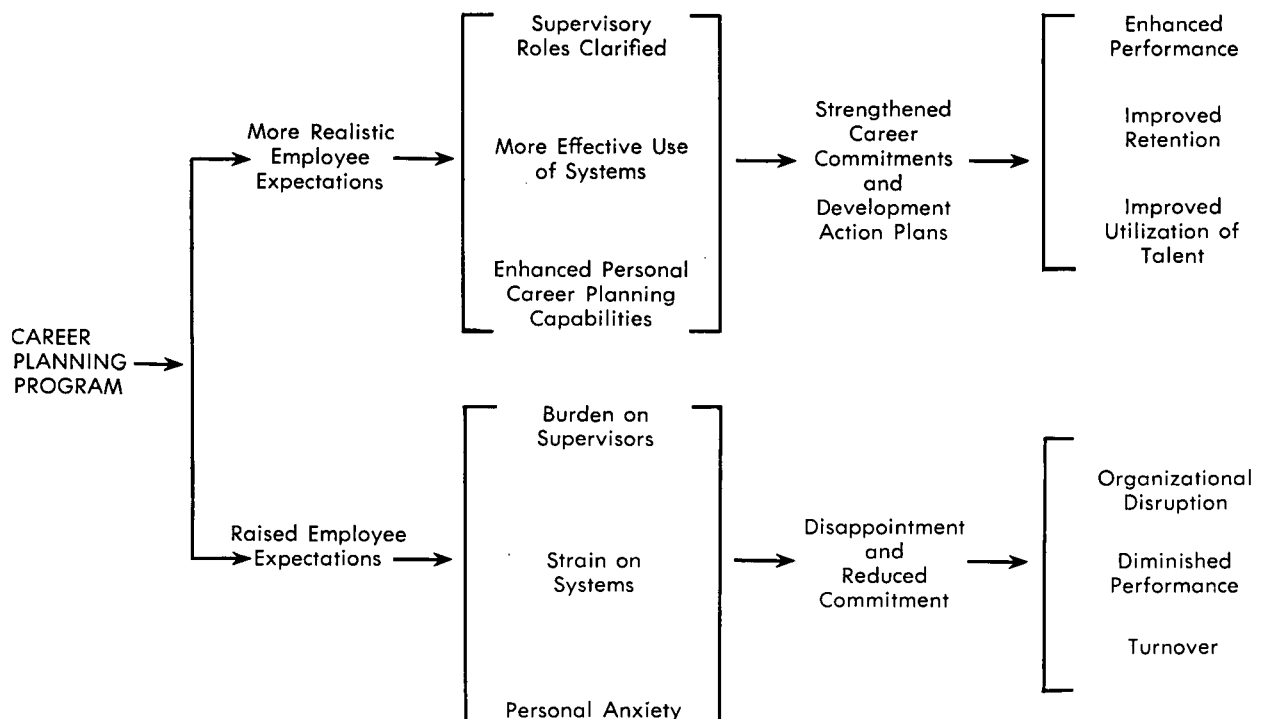
Rather than burdening supervisors unduly, career planning can clarify and support supervisory responsibilities. After all, realistic career planning focuses on current job responsibilities and mastery of job requirements. Current job performance and skills development are usually considered appropriate concerns of every supervisor. It is unlikely that all supervisors can or should even try to become career counselors. Rather, their primary role should be to discuss openly with each employee the *current job* goals, requirements and performance results. This job-related support is the most important "enabling system" a company can offer employees for career development.

Many companies have been training supervisors to conduct effective performance planning and review discussions with employees. Now new support is emerging from the employees. Through career planning, employees are better prepared to participate in the appraisal process. In fact, it has been found that individuals tend to be more critical of their own performance than are their appraisers.

Several large corporations require managers to meet with employees at least annually—more often if the employees desire—to review career progress and future career plans. As difficult as the task may seem, these companies have found that most managers do, in fact, have the abilities and that performance reviews are not unduly burdensome. Supervisory training on career development matters is essential, they report, along with adequate third-party staff support.

Career planning can also equip employees to make better use of available career development systems. Rather than raising expectations with promises that cannot be fulfilled, many companies candidly describe what their systems can and cannot do and

FIGURE ONE
The Effects of Career Planning



the job opportunities they anticipate. Career planning provides an opportunity to demonstrate how performance appraisal, training and development, performance incentives, compensation and other systems relate to personal needs and plans. These systems are the primary means by which personal career goals are achieved and company staffing needs met.

Effective career planning requires facts to stimulate and guide individual training. Individuals ask, "How can I know what I want to do if I don't know the alternatives?" Career planning should help answer questions such as this by providing information about job requirements and alternative career paths, compensation opportunities and available development resources. Company information may be communicated through workbooks, videotapes, booklets or other ways. Cases and readings on career-related issues also can be provided. As part of the information, it is important that employees learn about the company's business—what it is doing and why, its plans and objectives, and future career opportunities. Telling employees a straight story about career options builds employee commitment to the company and helps avoid "rocking the boat."

Rather than leading to heightened individual anxiety, career planning can enhance self-confidence and self-determination. Experience suggests that the key to a successful program is *depth*—of information provided to employees, of employee thinking and of career planning skills developed. Career planning cannot be a superficial exercise, nor merely another self-development program. To avoid "rocking the boat," career planning needs to be an intensive, voluntary, recurring and self-directed process of self-examination. Moreover, it must lead to the development of realistic personal goals and action plans.

End Results

The primary aim of a career planning program is not to help employees lay out a career plan, *per se*. Rather, the objective is to help employees acquire the skills essential for planning their own careers. For example, when a major oil company designed a pilot study to evaluate its new career planning program, a detailed questionnaire was developed to

measure changes in participant career attitudes, information adequacy and specific career planning skills. The intent of the program, stated the company, was to equip employees with the skills needed to develop their own career plans.

Of course, to maintain employee interest in an in-depth program, workbooks and related materials must be attractive, interesting and relevant. Experience indicates that a high degree of structure (checklists and short-answer questions as opposed to open-ended exercises), bite-sized sections (so that they are not overwhelming) and attractive graphics are necessary to gain and hold the employee's interest. Readings and exercises should be simple and interesting, yet challenging. When supplemented with counseling, group workshops and other resources, self-directed materials are tools that will build individual career planning capabilities.

More realistic career planning, as described above, generally results in strengthened employee commitment to their careers and personal development action plans. Some employees who contemplate leaving the company may decide to stay after discovering that desired opportunities do, in fact, exist. Proponents of career planning observe that today's work force is increasingly mobile as the "student activists" of the sixties become "activist" employees seeking careers. Of course, career planning may accelerate decisions to change occupations or companies. But this should actually result in better matching of individuals and jobs and improved utilization of capabilities.

At best, corporate career planning presents the company's needs and resources in an open, candid and helpful manner. Rather than disrupting an organization, it can only strengthen the commitment among employees who represent the core of its talent. Of course, the risks are greater for a stable or contracting organization than for a growing one, because opportunities are limited. But even in these cases, career planning can help stimulate employees and guide them toward the personal development and alternative work opportunities best suited to them.

The function of current job activities and skill development as a step in career planning may result in a better employee focus on the work to be done.

By reinforcing performance planning and appraisal activities, career planning may contribute to improved performance productivity.

A Suggested Strategy

A career planning process that will have positive effects must be carefully developed and implemented. Figure Two outlines the step necessary.

First, an organization should conduct an audit to identify the needs it wants to satisfy and to develop a strategy for implementing the program. A large consumer products company, for example, conducted a series of interviews with employee relations

FIGURE TWO
Implementing A Career Planning Program

- I. **Define Needs and Develop Strategy**
- II. **Develop Necessary Resources**
Support Systems
Career Opportunities Data
Workbooks
- III. **Pilot Introduction**
Evaluation
Refinement
- IV. **Full Introduction**
Inform Managers
Communicate to Employees
Establish Resource Center

staff members to find out whether employees wanted a career planning program and what techniques they thought would be most applicable. The company obtained factual inputs from 20 individuals, including top corporate personnel executives, employee relations managers in the operating divisions, all members of the training and development staff and representatives from compensation, data systems, manpower planning and other employee relations functions. The result was a plan of action that became part of the following year's budget activity.

In other companies, inputs have been obtained from other staff and operating managers. This helps establish a supportive climate for introducing the

program once it is developed. Participation by managers in the early development of a career planning program helps allay concerns that it will burden them or otherwise "rock the boat" and also builds commitment to the program.

The second step is to develop the tools necessary to implement the program. Personnel systems supporting career development should be checked and any shortcomings corrected. For example, an insurance company had several performance appraisal systems in use, but felt that greater consistency was needed. A new appraisal process was developed that served both performance and development aspects, and this process was introduced through management workshops. In other companies, needs have been identified in other areas: counseling staff, training and development programs, personnel data systems or inventories, job posting, job description, salary administration, manpower planning (staffing requirements), recruitment and selection, personnel policies, etc.

In another company, a sophisticated personnel data system was in place, but was not widely understood or used for purposes of identifying candidates for job vacancies. The company developed a "career profile" printout for each employee and strengthened the procedures for making use of the data base.

But, perhaps the most common void in the resources needed to support career planning is realistic information on career opportunities. The best strategy is to build career information gradually, starting with simple charts that show job titles in each unit or function by organizational level. Salary level or grade need not be used, because the purpose is to identify only the possible job opportunities. To back up such a chart, a food products company published brief descriptions of the content and qualifications of each job. In another case, a bank published a manual containing all of these basic facts, sorted by department.

With the basic data in place, refinements may be made. For example, job titles can be grouped into "families" of similar jobs and possible job progression lines (career paths) among jobs and job families drawn. A computer company provides detailed information on level and job vacancies. And an oil company has published career paths within its financial and engineering functions.

Career planning workbooks are useful as basic, self-directed tools. Although many varieties of published workbooks are available, experience suggests that the tailored approach provides the realistic, in-depth information and exercises needed. IBM, Xerox, General Motors and other companies have developed their own workbooks, tailored to their particular needs. These workbooks generally provide exercises on self-analysis, career planning and career goal setting.

Information may also be included on the company's personnel systems, EEO/AA policies and practices, career opportunities, salary administration and other policies. Articles may be included to stimulate and guide individual thinking; illustrations help maintain interest. A major oil company developed a series of five workbooks that included these features. Employees receive each in sequence over a period of weeks: Know Yourself, Know Your Interests, Know Your Opportunities, Know Your Job, Develop Your Plan. A food products company developed a similar series of three workbooks: Know Yourself, Know Your Opportunities, Know Your Plan.

It is also advisable to pre-test workbook materials. In this way management can assess the effectiveness of the tools in achieving their intended purposes and make whatever modifications are necessary. Such a study may be limited to one location or represent a cross-section of all employees. In one company employees from all divisions were included; in another, the pilot group was comprised of the financial staff.

Finally, before the program is introduced, all supervisors and managers should be informed about the program so that they can answer employee questions. A Career Resource Center may be established (usually as part of the employee development function) to conduct the program and handle referrals from supervisors. The Center may provide:

- individual counseling on career matters and referral to other counselors for additional kinds of information

- group workshops, arranged in response to requests
- self-instructional development materials and courses
- information on career paths and job requirements
- company and external training and development programs such as seminars and courses, and
- additional reading materials on career planning.

The procedure for participating in the program should be widely communicated, so that all interested employees know that it is available, what is involved and how to sign up. Under Affirmative Action requirements, communication is often a significant task. One company was required to inform certain employees in writing about the program. In addition, it had to receive a signed statement from each individual affirming that she or he had the opportunity to participate in the program.

Conclusion

Effective career planning should help employees come to grips with what they want out of their working lives and translate their wants into realistic action plans that get results with the support of company resources. At the same time, career planning should not disrupt the functioning of the organization. It is one thing to force employees to analyze personal needs and set personal goals. It is another to make personal career plans fit into the company's organization plans, needs and ways of doing business. To avoid rocking the boat and at the same time fully achieve its objective—increasing employee confidence in the company—career planning needs to be a broadly based program.

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