



Career Orientations: Multi-generational Talent Management

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Multi-Generational Talent Management

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As organizations are struggling to develop effective talent management strategies in today's multi-generational, global workforce, they have been overlooking a proven concept they are already familiar with. The "internal career," or "career orientation" concept can be leveraged as a foundation to solve many of today's workforce issues.

The internal career is the self-definition of career success. It's more subjective and individually driven than the various motivational, values-oriented talent management interventions designed by organizations (Van Maanen, 1977; Schein, 1977). Given that employment contracts are shorter and attach less value to loyalty, Hall (2002, 2004) points out that this subjective inner career orientation may, in fact, be both more stable and more important as a behavioral guide than organizationally-defined career paths.

There are three internal career orientation theories that have been in existence since about 1980 that still have subscribers today. Edgar Schein's "career anchor" concepts (1978, 2006) serve as "master motives" or those which an individual would give up last. Michael Driver's "career concepts" (1982) are used by companies to better understand how a talented individual conceives his or her career. Likewise, Brooklyn Derr's "career success orientations" (1986) focus on five individual career maps that can change over time but remain stable personal references for a desired long-term work history.

- Derr's career success orientations are: **ADVANCEMENT**—the desire to reach the top; **SECURITY**—a long-term psychological contract between employer and employee; **FREEDOM**—being one's own person, autonomy; **CHALLENGE**—exciting, interesting, adrenaline-flowing work (technical, entrepreneurial, ideological); **BALANCE**— long-term equilibrium between work, relationships and self-care—not always at the same time.
- The identification of the concept of the career being on two continuums, one organizational and personal while the other internal and external, has been a significant contribution. By putting forward such an inclusive definition of the career, researchers can now more accurately reflect on why and how individuals make career choices, the dimensions of career success and satisfaction, and what happens to the idea of a career during moments of extreme changes in the nature of work (e.g., the movement from the industrial economy to the new information economy in the 1990s).
- Since internal-career orientations have served for nearly twenty-five years as stable measures of the why and what of long-term work orientations and because companies continue to value these concepts for human resource management, it is important to further elaborate the internal career and delineate the implications for the management of talent.

RECENT RESEARCH

- From 2006–2007, the authors surveyed 1,395 participants of the *TalentDevelopment*® workshop conducted by Novations Group, Inc. The objective of the *TalentDevelopment* workshops is to provide tools and concepts individuals need to take charge of their careers and normally hosts an audience of knowledgeable workers from many large and medium-size companies (pharmaceutical, manufacturing, high-tech, health care, etc).
- While the majority of respondents were male, nearly 23% of the sample population was female. About 57% of the sample was partnered with children. The average age was 37, and the participants range in age from 24–58. Of those surveyed, 44% were university graduates, 24% held advanced degrees (masters or Ph.D. level), 19% were middle- or senior-level managers, only 29% of the sample were other than White/Caucasian.

KEY FINDINGS

In terms of stability, an analysis of Novations Group cumulative workshop data of all who had taken Derr's career orientation survey between 1990–2005 (n = 86,777) revealed the following career-orientation preference ranking, from most preferred to least: balance, security, challenge, and freedom and advancement. These same overall rankings are maintained in the recent survey except freedom and advancement are not statistically different, indicating less preference for advancement and more for freedom.

Several findings in the recent survey supported previous assumptions and the career literature and, while important, were not surprising. Persons with children were more balance-oriented than those with no children. In general, women were more balance- and security-oriented than men. Persons with longer tenure in the company (5+ years) were more security-oriented than those with less tenure. And, North Americans were more balance-oriented than those from outside North America. This latter finding must, however, be qualified because of the small sample size (only 12% of the sample was non-North Americans).

Three findings seem to us to have important HR implications for managing the multi-generational workforce. Better employee engagement can be achieved by addressing individual career orientations as products of professionals who have just entered the workforce, hold advanced degrees, or find themselves in the mid-to-late career.

First, young talent professionals (less than age 33) are advancement-oriented. This finding is consistent with research on the “what’s in it for me” generation (i.e., Millennials, Gen Y’s), whose name reflects the attitude of young careerists who are and want to move “up the ladder” quickly. Although Millennials may try to look like high-potentials at a younger age and hone in on a more dominant career orientation at mid-career, organizations need to think of creative and cost effective ways to sustain this group’s advancement-oriented mindset until they achieve enough work-life experience and a more mature and enduring career orientation.

Who are the Millennials and what do they want from organizations in the way of advancement opportunities? Born between 1977–1997, Millennials represent 81 million members with over 29 million already in the workplace. As they continue to become a driving force, organizational leaders will need to develop flexible and varied leadership behaviors from this group if they expect to attract and retain them. Because offering high paying salaries and hierarchical

movement up the corporate ladder is not always practical or feasible, organizational leaders should reshape programs to nourish the Millennials' advancement orientation. According to Meredith, Schewe, and Hiam (2002), "to develop a more effective work environment, managers must learn to identify, profile, and tap into the latent feelings and values that were formed when their employees were coming of age."

What are these latent feelings and what can organizations do to change the mindset from "what's in it for me, now" to "how do I prepare, now" in order to get ready for future advancement opportunities? How do organizations shape an advancement orientation, while not offering the typical advancement opportunities? The answer may be quite simple. Redefine what it means to advance by demonstrating the relationship between the following four competencies and advancement opportunities:

- **Leadership Development:** Millennials want to become leaders who have the demonstrated ability to take the organization in the right direction. Work on building future leadership competence by providing them visible, important, and complex job assignments—not necessarily more responsible ones.
- **Interpersonal Skills:** Millennials want to become leaders who work well with others. In the technologically driven era of the internet, text messaging, Web 2.0, and social media, Millennials often forget about the necessary element of working face-to-face with colleagues and clients. Teach them to communicate with people, not just through technology.
- **Managing Others:** Millennials want to become leaders who have the ability to create a positive work environment for others. Teach them skills like facilitating, collaborating, teamwork, and working through others.
- **Effective Communication:** Millennials want to become leaders who project credibility and confidence. Teach them that gaining credibility and confidence takes time. During that time, they should focus on active listening, presenting and articulating their thoughts convincingly, and writing effectively.

We also found that moving "up the corporate ladder" (i.e., advancement orientation) may not be the only motivator for higher education. Counter to what most HR professionals believe, we found that advanced-degree professionals (i.e., masters—including MBAs—or higher) were more challenge- than advancement-oriented. Therefore, working on challenging and intellectually stimulating job assignments—those that reduce intellectual stagnation—may be just as rewarding as upward mobility. Respondents with this career orientation tended to be male (73%) and ranged broadly in age from 24–58. Most (57%) were partnered with children. Seventy percent had worked in their current position for three years or less.

These advanced-degree professionals are driven by projects they consider challenging and interesting. While in graduate school, they were motivated to think outside the box, to challenge the status quo, and to develop real-world solutions to complex problems. This is not to say that upward mobility is not important—these individuals recognize that progression goes hand in hand with development, learning new skills, and having new experiences—but they expect a steady stream of opportunities in the near term, not years down the road.

What can organizations do to develop advanced-degree, challenge-oriented professionals? In our experience, providing challenging job assignments, especially ones that provide them with “career best” opportunities, is foremost in keeping them engaged and at peak performance. “Career bests” happen when individuals use their talents and passions to meet an organization’s need. Talents include the things that individuals are naturally good at and passions represent the things they care a lot about, or the things that really motivate them. The organization’s needs are driven by its strategy and objectives. Examples of specific actions that individuals can take to remain challenged are:

- Drawing a flow chart of their work activities and identify how their work aligns with key organizational initiatives
- Developing a philosophy of continuous improvement—always working under the assumption that there is a better way
- Finding measures that reflect the effectiveness of their processes and procedures and monitoring them

Organizations can keep challenge-oriented professionals engaged by:

- Encouraging them to volunteer for interesting projects and assignments
- Telling them to share with bosses and team members what kind of work is stimulating and interesting and what is desirable
- Counseling them to be patient and willing to also do some necessary and even “boring” work in return for some challenging assignments

Finally, those persons around 45 years of age recognize that his or her career is in the latter stages and most have tailored a career orientation to reflect this. It is not surprising that those in mid-to-late career would be more security-oriented. As has been noted by many sources, older workers may find it difficult to go out and compete with younger workers in the job market for several reasons, including biases in the interview and hiring processes (HR Magazine, Society for Human Resource Management, pg. 14, March 2008), technology changes, and so forth. The mid-career person may be less likely to job hop and more interested in building benefits associated with stability and long tenure—401(k) accounts, vacation accruals, health benefits, and other benefits that will help in retirement.

However, the importance of freedom at this career stage may be overlooked. A person in mid-career has paid his or her dues—often having taken on less desirable assignments over the years, put in long hours, and built important relationships. As a result of this loyalty and experience, credibility and trust are generally high. Allowing freedom in the way work gets accomplished can be very motivating and empowering. Once the objective of the project/task is clarified, then having the ability to frame the work in a different or creative way that applies the expertise an employee has gained over 20+ years might greatly appeal to those with a freedom orientation. In other words, give them more slack or autonomy. People at this point in their careers are also beginning to think about their legacy—what will they leave behind? How will

they be remembered? The freedom to shape that legacy is an extremely powerful motivational tool.

IMPLICATIONS

So, what should HR practitioners glean from the research and this article? Our research tells us that there are differences in motivational factors. Most HR systems drive towards equality and consistency. While there are good reasons for this approach, HR practitioners and managers still need to consider the unique capabilities and interests of each person. We offer the following suggestions:

1. Recognize that the internal career drivers for people are going to be different, and they may change over time—be careful about making assumptions as to what all talent want or don't want. Be ready to include distinctive approaches based on individual differences.
2. Recognize that career success is going to be defined by the individual not necessarily by career paths as laid out by the organization.
3. Focus on contribution, not tenure. Consider how to maximize the contribution of each person while he or she is employed in the organization. Be willing to be creative in terms of job assignments and opportunities. Recognize that although money always plays a part in the employment equation, it is not necessarily the primary driver.
4. Ask yourself: Do we really know what motivates each person? How often do we conduct a rich development dialogue (and who leads this discussion)? Is the dialogue ongoing and regular (more than once per year)?
5. Help Millennial talent gain experience and build credibility quickly and help them understand how this experience will help them receive greater leadership opportunities in the future.
6. Provide challenging assignments for those with more education. Don't assume "MBA-types" are only interested in promotions.
7. "Let go" of those in the mid-to-late career by providing them with the room and flexibility to carry out their assignments their own way.

Diversity in the workplace is greater than it has ever been, and it's no longer just about race and gender. It is also about multiple generations, global perspectives, and diverse internal-career orientations. At the end of the day, our most talented workers will seek what really drives them. Since career success is defined by the individual we must increase our flexibility by capitalizing on the internal-career motivators each person brings to the workplace. Talented people will always find a way to exercise their passion while meeting the business need. It is up to us to ensure these needs stay in alignment.

End Notes

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