

Career Development: Best Practices on the Second Most Impactful Driver of Talent Attraction, Retention, and Engagement

“Right now, this is a job. If I advance any higher, this would be my career. And if this were my career, I’d have to throw myself in front of a train.”

— Jim Halpert, the TV show *The Office*

Career Development opportunities are an essential part of Employee Engagement. In fact, Key Driver Analyses consistently show that Career Development is the second most impactful way of increasing Employee Engagement, after Recognition. Simply put, if people’s desire to make advancement in their own career is not fulfilled, they will begin looking for work elsewhere. Opportunities to move up the career ladder often come down to availability of open positions—waiting for someone to die or retire to move up in the company is a sad reality for many people. When promotions seem like a waiting game to employees, organizations are at risk of turnover.

Organizational hierarchies are steadily shifting from a pyramid structure to a flat structure. When I was entering the workforce 29 years ago, the most common organizational charts showed a few people at the top and steadily more middle managers all the way down to the lowest level. It seemed like everyone managed someone else. In recent years, the trend has been to eliminate middle management positions in order to create a structure of less managers. In fact, the average number of middle-level positions in an organization’s hierarchy has decreased by 25 percent from 1986–2006. The former “corporate ladder” is now the “corporate lattice,” with more opportunities for employees to move up by actually moving in a lateral fashion.

A flat organizational structure has its pluses and minuses. While the structure may be a benefit to organizational processes overall, it is important to examine how it affects employees. Having less managers can be good for employees because it allows more freedom and autonomy. It can also help increase workflow and speed up the decision-making process, as projects do not have to be approved by so many individuals in the management hierarchy.

However, employees can consider a flat organizational structure as simply offering limited opportunities for career advancement. When managing others is not a common job duty, employees can perceive it as limiting to their career. Since so many organizations still have a pyramid structure, the experience of managing others is often an essential professional skill. If employees cannot obtain management skills at their current organization, it could be limiting to their career growth should they ever choose to leave the organization. After all, if two people have the same qualifications, except one has management experience and one does not, the person with management experience will likely have a comparative advantage in the job market. Organizations with a flat structure are generally not providing this advantage and oftentimes do not recognize how this might be limiting to their Engagement with employees. Thankfully, there are workarounds for offering management opportunities (and subsequently, Career Development opportunities) in a flat organizational structure. Many organizations offer their employees the chance to gain education in their field on the company’s dime.

According to a poll conducted by HR Solutions, only 6 percent of employers do not offer their employees educational advancement opportunities. Almost half of respondents said their organization offers a multitude of opportunities, including training/mentoring, certifications, continuing education, and tuition compensation to their employees. Managers should encourage employees to take full advantage of any educational opportunities their organization offers. Gaining additional education will allow employees to stay up-to-date in their field, as well as give them the tools they need to perform better in their jobs. Additionally, taking advantage of company programs, like mentoring, will give employees guidance on the best direction to take their career as well as the knowledge they will need to get there. When it comes to educational advancement, employers need to remember that by helping their employees grow, they will ultimately help the organization grow. Engaging in these types of programs ultimately is a win-win for all parties involved.

One great case study came from my work with Hospira, a leading Medical Products manufacturer. Their CHRO and Director of OD, Ken Meyers and Pam Puryear, respectively, created a wonderful means of engaging their staff to/with their Career Development; they created the Ignite Your Growth Toolkit

This online career development and planning toolkit provides about a dozen easily accessible resources that employees can refer to at any time. The kit includes tools ranging from self-assessments to best practices for understanding each individual's unique Engagement level. The tools are available to Hospira employees across the globe and are used in collaboration between employees and their Leadership. Through the toolkit, resources are provided for employees to take ownership into their own hands.

With the overwhelming success of the Ignite brand thus far, Ken and Pam, and other Senior Leadership at Hospira plan to continue igniting employees to embrace Engagement initiatives. The brand is indicative of an inspired method to invoke joint ownership of Engagement. With contributions from both ends of the spectrum, Hospira will likely continue rising in the realm of Employee Engagement.

This is an excerpt from Kevin Sheridan's *New York Times* Best-Seller *Building a Magnetic Culture*.