Managing Career Paths: The Role of the CLO

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These days, learning leaders are leading more than just learning. As they take on the broader issue of talent management, these executives have to give some consideration to how people progress through the organization and how development can support that advancement.

Despite the threat of an economic slowdown, the demand for people with exceptional abilities and transferable skills will exceed the supply for years to come, particularly in today's dynamic and increasingly global business environment. Indeed, we are in the early stages of the "War for Talent," forewarned by McKinsey & Co. in the mid-1990s. For some organizations, the shortage of skilled executives, middle managers and individual contributors in critical roles already is having quantifiable ramifications - from decreased production capacity to drops in customer satisfaction. The most acute problems are in health care, financial services, industrial manufacturing and some segments of the professional services sector.

Manage Talent, Manage Careers

For the organization, attracting top candidates from the outside is increasingly difficult and expensive. Therefore, companies facing this reality are moving en masse to implement talent management strategies with a focus on developing their existing employees to address the skills and knowledge gaps as a complement to their external talent acquisition efforts.

As a learning professional, you already may find yourself on a talent management committee with your counterparts in other HR functions, such as recruiting and compensation. If so, you are not alone. Many organizations have tasked such groups to make strategic investments that put the best people in suitable roles at the right time to drive performance.

The groups that succeed will be those who keep in mind not only the business' demands for talent, but also the career demands of today's workforce. After all, the macroeconomic trends driving the talent shortage also are producing unprecedented opportunities for people who know how to seize them.

Think about it: The retirement of baby boomers means job openings. The globalization driving many organizations' top-line growth means promotions and lateral assignments overseas for high-potential people. If employees at your organization cannot find or do not feel they are being prepared to take on such roles, they will likely look elsewhere.

A survey conducted by NYU's School of Continuing and Professional Studies in 2006 showed that New York professionals - who, while not a global sample, certainly are a representative microcosm - expected, on average, to change careers (not merely "jobs") three times in their life. Only 28 percent of the sample expected lifelong careers.

Why is this? For one, organizations have flattened during the past few decades, pushing responsibilities outward rather than simply up a management hierarchy. In addition, today's multigenerational workforce knows it cannot count on defined pensions from employers upon retirement. Couple this with longer life spans and the ubiquity of technologies and services that enable self-directed career explo-
Therefore, senior learning professionals, their partners in HR and business leaders charged with mobilizing key talent internally — rather than let it walk out the door — must provide resources and information to facilitate talent mobility throughout the corporation and enable employees to make informed decisions to manage their careers.

Career Path for One, Please
Traditionally, careers have been defined as stepwise progressions within specific disciplines (e.g., financial analyst, senior financial analyst, manager, director, VP of finance and perhaps even CEO). These levels have been mapped to compensation bands so that employees can see the commensurate salary increases that go with moving up the progression the organization has laid out. This way of describing a career worked well as long as employees could see that organizations were committed to moving people along these paths. While this still may work for specialized, technical disciplines, the days of moving along a linear path for 30 years toward a gold watch and a sizeable pension are gone for the most part.

Relevant career paths are essential to any organization interested in aligning its demand for talent with its supply. (See Figure 1, p. 50.) Variety in career paths will play a growing role going forward to achieve and maintain this alignment. Again, there are economic (not to mention sociological) reasons for this. On the talent demand side of the equation, businesses competing in today’s globalized, information-driven environment must alter their strategies and workforce plans too often to rely on static, linear career paths.

On the talent supply side of the equation, the definition of a career path for members of generations X and Y is different from that of their predecessors. For these employees, and for those who will soon enter the workforce (recently labeled “Gen-Connect” by futurist Jim Carroll), a desirable career path will be one that zigzags and requires new skills, competencies, relationships and experiences that reflect their interests and are largely shaped by technology. A career today might mean starting in operations, then transferring those skills and experiences to a different role altogether — perhaps even learning — and then doing something entirely different after that.

What’s a CLO to Do?
How long has it been since your organization updated its career paths? Do they reflect the dynamic business plans of your organization? Were they built on the premise that job security and advancement for employees have a greater dependence on experience needed, goal achievement and competencies than on length of service? Do they encourage individuals to consciously take stock of their strengths, interests, life events and development opportu-
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Figure 1: Aligning Organizational Interests With Individual Interests

- **Organization-Focused Processes**
  - Workforce Planning
    - Critical Positions
    - Skills Inventories
    - Long & Short Term Needs
    - Goal Management
  - Talent Pipeline
    - Talent Mobility
    - succession Planning
    - Learning & Development
    - Recruiting & Selection

- **Individual-Focused Processes**
  - Career Management
  - Individual Learning & Development
  - Job Searching
  - Rewards, Recognition, Promotion

Make it Easy for the Employee

Employees at most organizations are lucky if development planning is delivered at all. If so, it is typically driven by the calendar — a performance review with one’s manager or a career planning discussion with a leadership development specialist during a succession planning cycle, for instance. But for reasons pointed out earlier, employees would like to be more self-directed in seeking out opportunities. The key is to make it easy on them.

If you are on a talent management committee of some kind today, you likely are considering the role of existing and potentially new technologies in creating an “experience” for individuals who need access to all sorts of resources as they move through their careers. You may even be talking about extending the current self-service models applied to benefits administration to career management. If so, take comfort that you are heading in the right direction, and consider leveraging the design expertise you may have on your staff to make such a career management environment easy to use.

Remember that for the employees, it’s all about working in an environment that provides them with all the tools they need to easily manage their careers. For example, learning executives may present the most feature-rich learning management system to the talent management committee for approval to make the technology purchase. However, if it is not intuitive or worse yet does not provide the critical information to fuel its functionality (e.g., intuitive search taxonomy, offerings with clear benefits to the employee, a catalog that reflects competencies the organization needs to develop today), it is not going to provide much value.

So what should a career management environ-
In practice:

Influencing Competency Management

Recent research from the Aberdeen Group showed that best-in-class performers are up to 86 percent more likely than "laggard" companies to know which skills and traits make top performers. This statistic points to a relationship between understanding what core competencies are for the various roles within the workforce and how bringing in those skills and enhancing them contributes to the overall success of the business.

Obviously, having the right competencies in the right part of the enterprise is critical for aligning its personnel to its goals. Equally obvious is the fact that corporate learning can help ensure employees have the specific skills and knowledge they need to succeed in a particular role from both an individual and organizational perspective. But chief learning officers should be doing more than just developing training in reaction to a perceived need for this or that competency. To make themselves and their function more strategic, they should be deeply involved in the competency conversation from the outset.

This likely isn’t a profound revelation for learning executives, most of whom have been aware of how employee development relates to competency management for some time now. However, many of them probably aren’t where they need to be in terms of influencing this other aspect of talent. For the good of their organizations, this must change.

Effecting this change is not terribly complicated, either. Recognizing that learning and competency management share the same “people” rubric with many other related functions, learning leaders should involve themselves in other associated aspects of talent. These include:

1. **Hiring:** By creating hiring profiles with detailed and standardized competencies for various positions, organizations can bring on employees who will be more likely to hit the ground running. CLDs might want to participate in the creation and maintenance of hiring profile programs or simply voice support for them. In any event, these will make efforts around onboarding easier from the perspective of the learning department.

2. **Technical infrastructure:** CLDs should make sure their learning management system can track employee competencies somehow. There are essentially two ways to do this: Get a comprehensive LMS that includes some sort of application around competencies or attach the LMS to a separate but connected competency management system. This decision probably will rest largely on the resources and proficiency of the organization’s IT department.

3. **Performance management:** Once learning executives have some technical means of aligning competencies to learning, they can assess employees to make sure the knowledge actually has been absorbed and retained. It’s even better if there’s a feedback loop in place that can show employee performance well after the fact to make sure learning programs are having the right impact. For example, if several workers are evaluated as competent in certain areas but don’t achieve the desired job performance, learning professionals can revisit their programs to see if something is wrong with the content or delivery, the competency baseline needs to be raised or they need to teach altogether new skills.

4. **Succession planning:** Learning programs shouldn’t only familiarize employees with the competencies they need to know for their current jobs. They also should identify high potentials (via assessment methodologies) and eventually instruct them on the competencies they need to know for higher-level positions within a logical career progression. This will help prepare a talent pipeline for key positions within the enterprise, ones the organization might otherwise have trouble filling.

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