Managing Career Paths:
The Role of the CLO

Mike Brennan and Andrew Gebavi

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-

Mike Brennan and Andrew Gebavi are principal consultants with Knowledge Infusion. They can be reached at editor@clomedia.com.

ration, and it adds up to a workforce more independently minded than ever.

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.
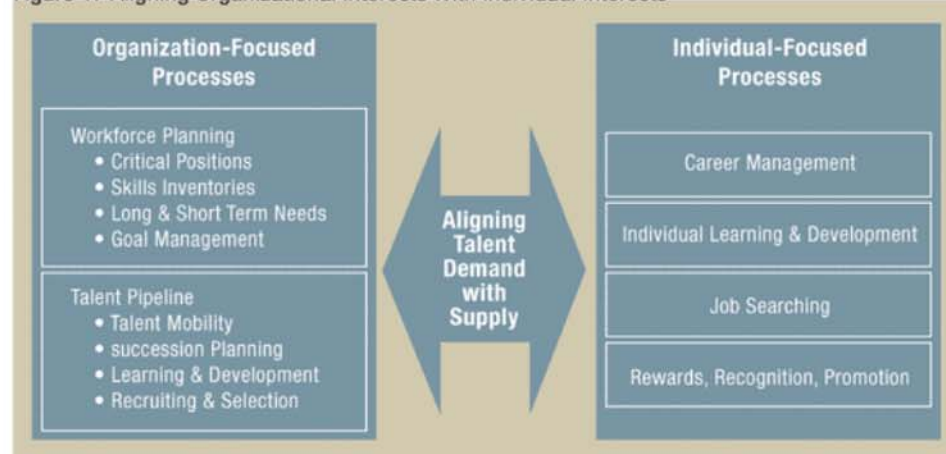
On the talent supply side of the equation, the definition of a career path for members of generations X and Y is different from that of their predecessors. For these employees, and for those who will soon enter the workforce (recently labeled "Gen-Connect" by futurist Jim Carroll), a desirable career 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-

Many organizations have tasked talent management committees to make strategic investments that put the best people in suitable roles at the right time to drive performance.

Figure 1: Aligning Organizational Interests With Individual Interests

Organization-Focused Processes		Individual-Focused Processes
Workforce Planning • Critical Positions • Skills Inventories • Long & Short Term Needs • Goal Management	**Aligning Talent Demand with Supply**	Career Management
		Individual Learning & Development
Talent Pipeline • Talent Mobility • succession Planning • Learning & Development • Recruiting & Selection		Job Searching
		Rewards, Recognition, Promotion

Senior learning professionals must provide resources and information to facilitate talent mobility throughout the corporation and enable employees to make informed decisions to manage their careers.

nities and apply them to possible future job roles inside the organization? If not, now is the time to take action.

So what can a CLO do to influence the way in which career paths are defined, managed and applied by the business? Plenty.

Collaborate to Lay the Competency Foundation

Skills, knowledge and experiences needed by the business to execute on plans should feed every talent management process in your organization. Job candidates should be assessed against them during the talent acquisition process. Employees and managers should be reviewed against them as part of development planning. CLOs should play a role in defining and updating these competencies.

To do this entails a performance consulting model used in collaboration with other HR executives — both functional specialists and generalists. This includes playing a role in organizational needs assessments and helping create job descriptions that include defined competencies.

What may start as an annual process that falls out of business planning should turn into more frequent, action-oriented meetings that include aggregating and analyzing information collected from a number of different sources (e.g., performance reviews, exit interviews, ad hoc requests from business leaders, etc.). This information can then be used to drive decisions related to competencies as well as job and career opportunities for employees. CLOs may use the outcomes of these to concentrate investments in training offerings, curricula and knowledge networks that map to these competencies.

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-

ment include? How about direct access to possible career paths within the organization if there are any common ones — or even not-so-common ones — with which some employees already have found success? Employees should have the ability to search jobs in which they're interested as well. From each job plotted along a career path, which may resemble a spider web, employees may access the following critical resources:

- A clearly defined job description, which the CLO may play a role in shaping through competency definitions.

- A competency assessment maintained by the learning function, so that someone who's interested can better evaluate his or her fit.

- Access to development programs, content and communities mapped to the competencies employees need to prepare for the role.

These resources may be provided alongside other resources not maintained by learning. One example would be access to sample profiles of current employees actually in the job, which might include their contact information or that of the HR representative who can further investigate a potential fit. Of course, those people in critical positions coveted by many employees could become resources for the L&D professional seeking employee mentors. Another would be a link to current openings for the position.

Emphasize Career Development in Curriculum

Employee self-service does not imply complete employee independence. Easy-to-use systems and a robust foundation of competencies will not go very far for employees if they do not have the support of their managers. The current speed of workforce turnover and volume employee-to-career matchmaking that will take place during the coming decades will require managers to be stewards of their employer's brand and champions of the people who report to them. For many organizations, it will mean a significant change in culture that encourages internal mobility. This will not be an easy shift for many managers.

Learning professionals will be involved in developing the competencies in these managers necessary to help employees navigate established career paths and blaze new ones. Examples of these competencies include the ability to acknowledge and reward people's strengths and accomplishments, engage them emotionally, offer them constructive feedback, identify development opportunities for them and offer them assignments that challenge them and provide personal fulfillment. ■

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. CLOs 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:** CLOs 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.

— *Brian Summerfield, bsummerfield@clomedia.com*