

Careers are no longer ladders How to develop professionally when job opportunities these days are winding, unique and changeable

Reuveni, Ben; Fast Company ¹ ¹ Fast Company . Hartford Courant ; Hartford, Conn. [Hartford, Conn]. 05 Sep 2021 : B.4.

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FULL TEXT

When I joined the workforce, careers were linear. Employees were expected to climb the "career ladder," starting as an entry-level assistant and working their way up to individual contributor, then to manager, etc., checking off an established set of skills and accomplishments along the way.

Today, that structure has changed. A sales representative might become your best marketer, a marketer can become an HR leader, and HR leaders can find their passion on the customer success team.

I've seen this firsthand through Gloat's talent marketplace platform, through the conversations I've had with global business leaders, and through my own experience, moving from a role as a solutions architect at IBM to founding my own company.

Modern careers are no longer ladders - they are lattices of vertical and horizontal opportunities, shaped by personal and professional aspirations, in addition to company needs. The pandemic only accelerated this trend, igniting our workforce to consider new paths and take on new skills.

Employee growth is ultimately the biggest driver of organizational growth and innovation, and the cost is higher than ever for companies that neglect the growth of their internal talent: 95% of employees are currently considering quitting their jobs, and a survey we conducted at Gloat earlier this year found that the number one reason employees move on is a lack of growth opportunities. One-third (34%) of employees said their company wasn't utilizing their full potential, and LinkedIn found that employees are nearly three times more engaged when they see opportunities to learn on the job.

So how can businesses avoid getting left behind by their best talent, and support modern career development? Here's what we've learned through our work at Gloat and our partnerships with some of the world's most progressive companies and HR leaders, who are writing the playbook for the future of work.

Level the (hybrid) playing field

For many years, career mobility has often been more about who you know than what you know. Corporations have operated within established, hierarchical structures that encourage silos and, as a result, growth and opportunities often come only to those who are selected for them by someone higher up the chain.

COVID-19, and the global pivot to a more distributed workforce, has only increased the chances that an organization might miss out on developing key talent simply because of where they sit and who they interact with on a daily basis. Jean Pelletier, VP of digital talent transformation at Schneider Electric, has seen this firsthand. And it's why she chose to invest in new technologies and processes that give all employees visibility into emerging opportunities within the company, and the agency to pursue them.

"If you're more introverted, or you're a field sales manager who is constantly out in the market, how you connect with growth opportunities may be different from how people walking around in the office hub access those same opportunities," she acknowledged. "Technology can help level the playing field and give equal access to all."

The dangers of sticking with an "out of sight, out of mind" approach? You might just lose your best people without

even realizing their full potential.

"If you have an employee sitting at a small satellite office, far from your primary headquarters, and they aren't seeing opportunities for growth, they might just leave," Pelletier said. "But that person might just be your company's best cybersecurity expert. The most important need for businesses today is: Keep your employees engaged, no matter where they are. It's incredibly competitive, and you really need to pony up and demonstrate that you're invested in them."

Embrace employee-led learning

As of 2021, 80% of CEOs rank the need to teach their workforce new skills as their biggest business challenge; at the same time, research shows that opportunities for learning and development are one of the top driving forces behind an employee's happiness and engagement at work. And yet, so often the way companies actually approach learning and development for their employees is inconsistent, one-size-fits-all, and comes from the top-down as part of an "upskilling initiative."

Just as career paths are becoming less linear, so, too, are the ways employees learn and develop new skills. Today, career development is complex, occurring across multiple mediums inside and outside of the workplace. It's driven as much by employee passions and interests as it is by the parameters of their job description. Companies need to meet their employees where they are with dynamic, democratized and data-driven growth opportunities or they will not only risk their bottom line, they will handicap their best talent as well.

"In a world where disruption is the new norm, we need to take thoughtful risks and move with urgency. That requires us to think differently about talent management. The real question becomes: How can we deploy the talents and skills of our 20,000-plus people at scale and with speed?" said Lucrecia Borgonovo, chief talent and organizational effectiveness officer at Mastercard. "At the same time, we want our employees to truly own their careers, applying their skills to different areas of the business and developing new skills that align to their passions.

"It's really about connecting them to their possibilities," she said. "That's a win for everyone - employees grow, Mastercard's business needs are met internally and, of course, our customers, who benefit from working with teams whose diverse experiences unlock more innovative solutions to their most pressing challenges."

The good news: Companies are increasingly recognizing their responsibility in meeting the development needs of their employees. "Businesses have been talking about this need to grow their people internally for a long time," said Borgonovo, who held leadership roles at Nike and Bristol-Meyers before joining MasterCard. "But I think many have really lagged in finding ways to actually tactically support their people through reinventing themselves and their skills."

Meeting employees' developmental needs takes much more than offering some extra training days, Borgonovo said. "We all learn in different places and in different ways," she said. "At Mastercard, we are introducing an AI-driven opportunity marketplace that makes it simpler, faster and easier for employees to develop and learn on their terms - whether through short-term projects, networking, mentorship opportunities - or even the opportunity to change jobs entirely."

Career progression is no longer a straight line. In fact, employees' career pathways are just as winding, unique and changeable as their lives will inevitably be. The companies that recognize that, and adapt to it, will be best positioned to thrive beyond this pandemic, and whatever comes next.

Ben Reuveni is the CEO and co-founder of Gloat.

Caption: fast company

DETAILS

Subject: Leadership; Employees; Employment; Pandemics; Career advancement; Career development planning; COVID-19; Workforce

Business indexing term: Subject: Leadership Employees Employment Career advancement Career development planning Workforce

Publication title: Hartford Courant; Hartford, Conn.

First page: B.4

Publication year: 2021

Publication date: Sep 5, 2021

Publisher: Tribune Publishing Company, LLC

Place of publication: Hartford, Conn.

Country of publication: United States, Hartford, Conn.

Publication subject: General Interest Periodicals--United States

ISSN: 10474153

Source type: Newspaper

Language of publication: English

Document type: News

ProQuest document ID: 2569140116

Document URL: <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/careers-are-no-longer-ladders-how-develop/docview/2569140116/se-2?accountid=44910>

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Last updated: 2021-09-09

Database: Hartford Courant

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