

The Economist

Career Pathing Potholes

by Julie Winkle Giulioni

Career paths are enjoying renewed interest as organizations take the steps within their power to attract, engage, develop, and retain talent in an increasingly competitive employment marketplace. These initiatives generally involve illuminating the specifics of various roles, identifying what's required for success in each, and offering actions that will help individuals move among them pursuing their aspirations via different positions.

Depending upon the size of the organization and number of job titles, it can be a daunting exercise to provide this kind of visibility.

And for many organizations, it can also be a frustrating exercise because despite the effort, employees remain largely disappointed in the commitment their organizations are willing to make in their development. The problem with paths is that they often leave a progressive, predictive and even prescriptive impression in the minds of workers. And no matter how many caveats are written into the documentation, paths are internalized by many as promises.

Perhaps it's time to rethink this 'pathways' approach as a career development framework – because it's largely inconsistent with today's workplace. Today's organizations are hierarchically flatter than in the past, leaving fewer opportunities for upward mobility. (And let's face it... that's where many employees have their eyes set.) Too frequently people study the maps, satisfy the requirements, and then find themselves

stuck – having qualified for a next role on the path but with no opening available to them. Obviously, this breeds discontent among employees; but also with managers who are left with the challenging task of motivating employees who feel duped.

Additionally, in many settings today, the very nature of work is creative, agile, and responsive to a dynamic environment. Jobs tend to be formed more spontaneously around the needs of a customer or project. Given automation and AI, job titles are constantly being eliminated; but new ones are sprouting up just as quickly.

Perhaps a static career path is simply not nimble enough to serve today's needs. Perhaps we need to shift our mindset toward non-linear, dynamic, constellations of possibilities instead.

Several years ago, we thought it very hi-tech to print out MapQuest directions before heading to a new location. Today, it's laughable. We have Waze and any number of other options that provide real-time guidance and feedback to get from point A to point B. Those looking to advance and develop their careers need equally agile tools.

Employees can no longer plot out a limited, one-dimensional, linear career plan. They must juggle multiple options and zones of possibility. They require frequent choices and pivot points that allow them to adjust to changing conditions. When one road is shut down, they need to already be working on several others to keep them moving forward toward their goals.

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Employees – just like drivers – also need to be able to see and respond to the ‘traffic’ on the road. If there are limited spots, a low likelihood that openings will present themselves, and/or many others headed for that same highway, maybe another approach will be more productive. Dynamic feedback about patterns and possibilities is what today’s employees need to better navigate their careers – just like their cars.

Career pathing offers robust and insightful information mapping that can educate employees about the nature of the organization and offer some structure for their thinking. It’s a tangible tool that supports but is not synonymous with career development. Career development is completely intangible. It’s the relationship employees have with their managers. The ongoing dialogue they engage in. The joint discovery. The mutual trust and respect that allows for risk-taking and experimentation. The growth...which fundamentally is the goal of career development (and which is not dependent upon assuming different roles as a traditional path might suggest.)

So, in an effort to offer employees transparency and support in their career development, it’s important to:

- Avoid letting the system, process or tool hijack what is most vital for development – relationships, conversations, and opportunities.

- Be more organic about development. Focus less on predictable paths and put more energy toward bringing greater visibility to a range of possibilities that exist – formal and informal.
- Offer examples of career journeys that are creative, interactive, and all-over-the-board as a way to demonstrate that there are many ways to achieve success.
- Ensure that leaders are skillful and prepared to engage in career conversations with their employees.

Because, when it comes to something as important as career development, we don’t want to focus on the map and lose sight of the broader and more satisfying journey.

*Julie Winkle Giulioni is a champion for workplace growth and development and helps leaders optimize talent and potential within their organizations. Named one of Inc. Magazine’s top 100 leadership speakers, she’s the co-author of the international bestseller, *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go* and author of the Nautilus and Axiom business book award-winner, *Promotions Are So Yesterday*. Julie is a regular contributor to numerous business publications.*