

The Smart Manager

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Illustration by: nilesh jvalekar



Winter is the founder of the Career Innovation Group, a company that “respond[s] to top employers’ desire for more practical solutions to talent issues”.

agile careers – the new talent agenda

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SMART SUMMARY The pace and scale of change has left employees in a ‘career vacuum’, according to new research by workplace experts Career Innovation, carried out in partnership with remote coaching firm Creative Metier. In part, the cause lies with HR practices that focus mainly on top talent and ignore the potential of the remaining workforce.

In a bid to create organizations that are resilient and change-ready, progressive employers are giving intensive help for managers and employees to have career conversations. They’re communicating the new realities of 21st century agile careers, doing career deals with different groups of employees, and supporting them with a blend of coaching, workshops and online tools for the ‘vital many’, rather than confining themselves to solutions for the ‘top talent’.

Clustered round a virtual ‘roundtable’ in March this year, eighteen of the world’s top employers were

discussing the pace of change. Once this topic was a matter of rhetoric and prediction by management gurus. Now it is everyone's daily reality. Dialing in from India, Europe and the US, The Boeing Company, Colgate Palmolive, Essar Group, Orange, Volvo Car Corporation and others were asking the same questions: What kinds of change are we experiencing? Are we moving from one-off change (like M&A) towards constant change? If so, what is the impact on our people and their careers, and how are we supporting them? What would it mean to create a truly change-ready workforce?

Their questions were informed by the results of research by our organization, the Oxford-based think tank and workplace experts Career Innovation (Ci), conducted in partnership with remote international coaching firm Creative Metier. The results were unequivocal: 'constant change' is the norm for all but one of the 36 well-known international employers interviewed for the study. In the face of increased budget constraints, most expressed the need for 'significant cultural change', and many are expanding in the BRIC markets while putting in place new models of global and local management (see box).

exhibit01: types of change experienced by organizations

change	% agree
we are constantly in a state of change	97%
we are experiencing increased levels of change	92%
we are introducing new ways of working (eg more virtual/mobile working,different working patterns, more international mobility)	81%
we are experiencing increased budget constraints	81%
we need to bring about significant cultural change	78%
demographic changes having an impact on our organization (for example, increasing numbers of Gen Y, increasing numbers of woman, retirement of Baby Boomers)	75%
non-core activity is being stopped or outsourced (non-core could be HR, finance, other support services)	61%
we are expanding into new geographical areas	61%
we have recently (within the last six months) undergone a significant restructuring/reorganization	56%
we have run a significant redundancy program in the last six months or expect to run one in the next six months	47%
we have run a significant redundancy program in the last six months or expect to run one in the next six months	47%
we have recently (within the last six months) experienced a merger or acquisition	39%

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This has resulted in a new career environment for workers. “New ways of working are being introduced by four out of five organizations,” commented Glynis Rankin from Creative Metier, who launched the report at a reception at the British High Commission in Singapore. “People need to develop different skills as jobs become more specialised and as organisations expand in the world’s growth markets. But who knows how long those skills will be relevant? Another change will come along. So they don’t just need training for today. They need help to be adaptive and resilient for tomorrow”.

The idea of resilience is well established in psychological literature, with its emphasis on optimism as a vital personal characteristic. Now career resilience and career agility are taking on new relevance. When employees feel uncertain about the future and how to manage it, their productivity and engagement are affected. They resist change. Morale suffers. Yet, over the past twenty years, career support has declined, with managers reluctant to offer a longer-term view of employment options, due to uncertainty about the future. This has resulted in what could be described as a ‘career vacuum’ for many people, and ever since McKinsey’s ‘war for talent’ there has been a focus on potential star players at the expense of most of the workforce.

Back at the virtual roundtable, there was strong agreement that it was time for a more inclusive approach, looking at a proposition for the whole workforce—careers for all. “Tapping into people’s career aspirations is the key to help people feel more comfortable about change,” said one participant. “But it’s a new career deal today, and we need to communicate that and support it with tools, resources

and appropriately equipped managers.” Several contributed ideas from their own experience which support this concept—use of ‘stay interviews’ as a mechanism for having career discussions, giving recognition to people who grow talent, using peer-to-peer learning—a low-cost option—and highlighting role models for careers. Unlike talent management, career initiatives are more likely to be popular. “We have never had such enthusiasm for an internal initiative,” said one.

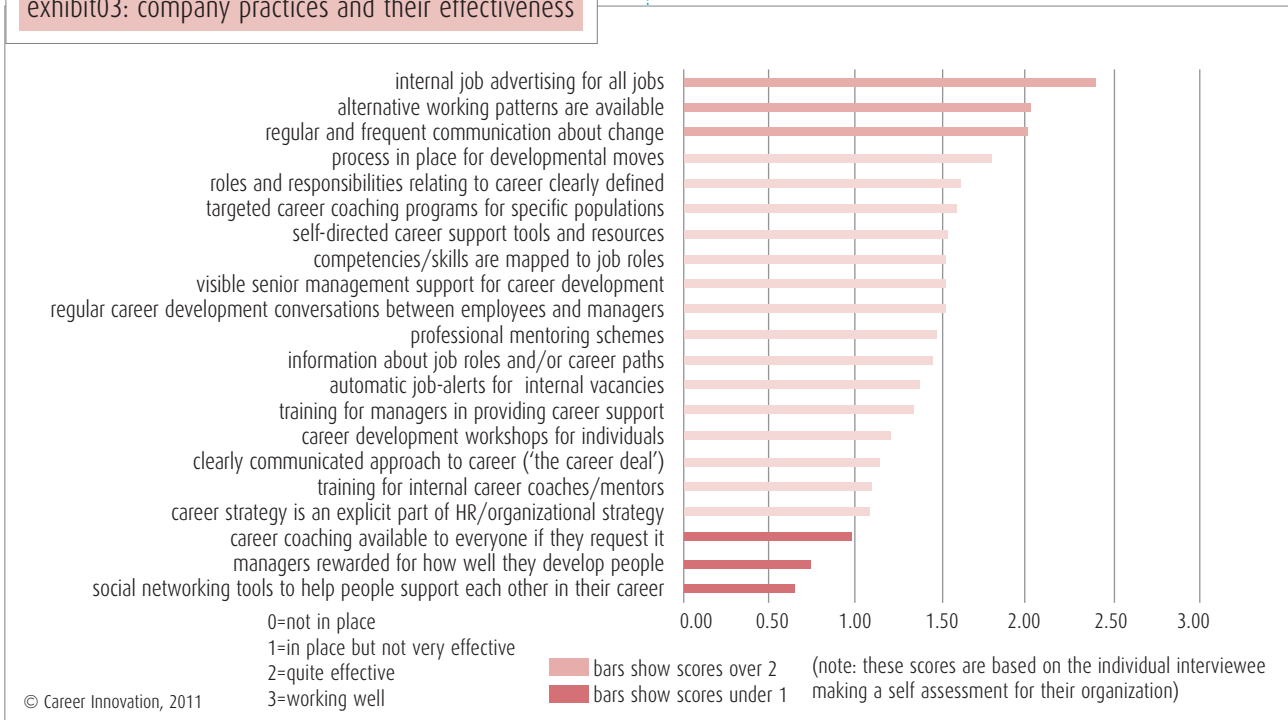
But there seems to be a reality gap. Three quarters of the organizations interviewed for the Ci research admitted they don’t have a strategy for providing the kind of practical career support that helps workers develop ‘career resilience’ and adapt to new realities. Few have measures in place to know if they are achieving this. Most admit their practices are not yet good enough, yet they have not supported managers to have career conversations, nor do they hold them accountable for career development. Only 44% of respondents said that regular career development conversations were taking place. Many admitted that whilst the process existed, the reality is that it does not work. All their efforts are targeted at top talent—the chosen few.

exhibit02: how careers are changing			
1980	1990	2000	2010
job for life: traditional career model gives way to flexible working, project-based work	employability: the basis for job security career resilience: self-reliant, individual driven career	war for talent: career development for a few career vacuum: constant change, no longer-term view of career	new agile career deals: flexible workforce career on government agendas

Whether they felt prepared for it or not, respondents articulated a sense that the nature of a career is itself changing and that this requires a mindset shift—a new paradigm for an era of constant change. To perform in this new environment, individuals will need greater resilience and agility than ever before, to be able to reinvent themselves for unknown future challenges. As one interviewee put it: “There are more opportunities, but these will only be realized by the people who are willing to adapt and embrace the changes.”

A few organizations are ahead of the rest in filling the ‘career vacuum’ and building career resilience with strategic intent (see exhibit04). One telecom company is undergoing a merger with its associated culture change, new ways of working and restructuring. Change workshops for all employees have a strong focus on career skills, including CV writing and making a ‘skills inventory’, which equip people well to navigate the high level of lateral movement going on in the organization. Performance workshops for managers have helped

exhibit03: company practices and their effectiveness



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Key message for employees: Careers are a lattice, not a ladder.

develop conversation skills, which have improved career development conversations and helped manage the integration of two organizations. There is recognition that career development is important for the new organization going forward, and a new post is being created, with responsibility for career strategy.

The Ci Career Resilience report highlights three things organizations can do:

01 communicate today's realistic and varied 'career deals' and provide a new kind of roadmap for careers. Not a traditional career ladder, but a map that shows possible roles and the mix of capabilities and experiences that could lead there. Link this clearly with business strategy, to deliver a more agile workforce. Key message for employees: Careers are a lattice, not a ladder. Aim for great experiences to learn that also benefit your employer.

02 help people to be resilient in their career. Not just top talent, but everyone. That means blending online tools with encouragement to build a career support network of friends, colleagues and mentors. You can measure the benefits in improvements to talent attraction, retention, learning, and engagement through times of change. Key message for organizations: People can manage their own career, but they almost always need a little help. It's a strategic investment that pays back many times over, especially at peak times of change.

03 support managers to develop their people. Career conversations are a vital way to raise engagement and doing this regularly can build a resilient, change-ready workforce. Key message for managers: It's not difficult, and you don't need to have all the answers. Just make a little time for it, put down your pen, switch off the computer and have an honest conversation focused on the future.

Judging from this research and the roundtable conversation that resulted, we're starting to see a change in the way organizations manage talent for a static and predictable world, toward a more dynamic and varied approach across the whole workforce. This isn't based on sentimentalism. Segmenting the workforce is a good idea, and should be encouraged. But we should aim for a 'segment of one'. Everyone needs to feel they are working in a place of opportunity, where everyone is valued and the lowest in the rung can aspire to the highest achievements.

To achieve that, things will need to change. Today's elitist talent management appears riddled with questionable practices and risks disengaging the entire workforce. One obvious flaw is the individualistic nature of many HR practices, which fail to account for the high performance that comes from a diverse team. So employers end up paying bonuses or fast-tracking certain individuals without enough evidence, when in reality, it was the team together that succeeded. Another problem is the language we use. If 5% of workers are 'talent' then what are the rest of us? Clearly, it is hardly a recipe for high employee engagement. ❑

exhibit04: the Sensis example

sensis - increasing engagement by 20%

Sensis, an Australian-based company employing 4,000 people which provides digital marketing solutions has just been awarded the 2011 Employer of the Year award by the Career Development Association of Australia. There's a clear business rationale behind their inclusive career development strategy. "While ultimately it's an individual's responsibility to manage their own career, our comprehensive career development strategy aims to provide resources that help promote career resilience and agility. This is integral to driving people engagement, productivity and profitability" says Maria Floudiotis, National Career Development Manager. A wide range of online, workshop and networking resources support employees and managers and has resulted in 70% of people feeling confident that they can achieve personal career objectives - and a rise of 20% in engagement scores between 2002 and 2009.