

# Chapter One

## Putting Career Management in Context

*“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”*

**George Bernard Shaw**

This book focuses on career management from both a corporate and individual perspective. Organisations can do more to fully engage with their people; and all of us need to be open to how best to manage our own careers if we are to fulfil our own ambitions against a backdrop of continuing worldwide economic uncertainty. Very few books are of themselves transformational; however, the actions that are subsequently taken by the reader may be. Hopefully this book will present some new ways of examining situations and opportunities from a different perspective. The aim is to contribute to the process of making sense of a highly competitive labour market not by providing instant solutions but through processes for self-analysis and individual and corporate reflection.

The focus is therefore upon how individuals may best develop their own approach to getting the best return on oneself and also examines how organisations can proactively embrace the concept of **ROM** to better engage with their people. Supervisors and line managers are frequently ignored as the links in

the process and the opportunity to do more to get them involved is explored in Chapter Eleven.

The on-going uncertainty created by what is the world's first genuinely global recession has implications at every level and location, from macroeconomic forecasting by the World Bank to the price of onions in India. It is clear that the duration and impact of the "crash" is going to be greater and longer lasting than anticipated only a couple of years ago. The interconnectedness of the global village has delivered considerable benefits, but the corrosive impact of "instant" communication upon a world economy still seeking the confidence to rebuild itself is producing divergence rather than convergence at many levels.

This does not mean that career opportunities have disappeared, or that all organisations are in permanent lay-off mode. But making sense of a fast-moving puzzle, with often contradictory outcomes, does require patience and resilience. These days both individuals and organisations are on a more or less constant journey of change. Moreover it's a journey where it is not always possible to anticipate what will happen along the way. We have entered an era of dilemma and paradox – a form of "Rubik's cube" of competing challenges and potential uncertainties. This is exemplified by those organisations which can appear bipolar as they stretch to both attract and retain talent whilst also having to contemplate plant closures, cost cutting and restructuring as they face up to new market challenges. Those organisations likely to confront and effectively manage these competing challenges are those making significantly greater use of active employee engagement strategies and processes.

## **The bigger picture**

Add climate change, the Arab Spring and the potential capacity of rogue states to derail a fragile global recovery and the frail condition of the Eurozone economies to the recipe, and it is easy to understand why it is a necessity to regularly recalibrate personal expectations against what is possible. This does not mean saying goodbye to ambition, quite the contrary. However, without a sense of where you are now it is impossible to measure progress and to reset objectives.

This book does not pretend to have the answers to these geopolitical problems, nor can it claim to have a universal answer to the need to re-energise the global economy. However, today's environment necessitates, at the very least, individuals and organisations reviewing the way in which careers and talent are managed.

Whilst the global economy may have the resilience to recover, established strategic panaceas such as downsizing, outsourcing and retrenchment may not work in the face of the challenges that the future holds. And remember that each and every time a downsizing occurs, a proportion of the “survivors” who remain with the organisation will actively contemplate a move to a potentially safer environment. “Safer” can mean a search for greater security but it may also embrace an industry or sector that is in growth or an organisation that looks a better bet for career development or the desire for a change in working environment and personal lifestyle.

The leaders who will be running successful organisations in the future are those who recognise that a different approach is needed, based upon systematically developing a clearer view of what the future may hold and actively managing the transition to the new world. The “war for talent” – attracting, developing

and retaining good people – remains a challenge, even in times of duress. Attracting and retaining the “right” talent is an important element in ensuring organisational survival. The pay-off for the organisation in getting this right is considerable, including the use of robust career management processes to develop the bench strength of next generation leadership contenders. This does not mean cloning or never “letting go” of able people. Good leavers are good for business; so too are those who are able to take a divergent perspective on business needs. The process of clarifying who has the “right stuff” requires a culture which encourages transparent discussions on career potential. It necessitates the acknowledgement that convergent and divergent perceptions are required.

Are new competencies required to master a significantly different business landscape? Is talent management aligned to business strategy? Is the CEO’s involvement visible and consistent? Where does talent management sit in the HR hierarchy? And are succession and performance management processes congruent with a common language to articulate what’s wanted?

However, organisations and those leading them can, and often do, revert to unproductive patterns of behaviour when under pressure. Managing the present without compromising the future is particularly relevant in the context of managing talent, with short-term thinking potentially jeopardising future organisational capability and capacity. The era of being sent on a training course as a gift or to lessen the blow of failed promotion, or to show someone they were important to the organisation is, hopefully, long gone. A key issue for any organisation during any downturn is the need to balance the competing needs of taking appropriate measures to maintain the integrity of the organisation as a going concern **and** taking the necessary action to ensure the enterprise is fit to compete as the

downturn ends and as new opportunities emerge. Investing in talent management is a critical part of this process and career management can provide the means for making this process of greater relevance to individuals.

The phrase "precarious employment" is more widely used these days with some assessments suggesting that about one in ten of the UK's workforce may be in this position.

Those employed – but not "fully employed" – will sit in this category, and whilst some are very content with a less than full-time role others would no doubt really like to get themselves back into a full employment mode. The part-time route may have attractions for both employee and employer potentially providing greater flexibility for both.

There is also the impact of the so-called "hourglass" economy to consider with opportunities increasing at the high and low skill ends of the labour market and opportunities in the middle becoming squeezed. Certainly the notion of the lifetime career is clearly being challenged at the same time as people are contemplating the need to work longer with the number of people in employment in the UK aged 65 or over topping one million for the first time in 2013. The charity Age UK has welcomed the increase but noted that those who remain in the labour market tend to have stayed in a job or have become self-employed whereas those trying to find a job again after redundancy or a spell as a carer were likely to face barriers to employment.

Older workers are needed because current forecasting suggests there will be 13.5 million vacancies in the next ten years, but only seven million people will leave school and college during the same period. However, a newspaper headline accentuates the consequential impact of this rise in older workers remaining in employment: "Young workers fear later retirement blocks

career prospects” (*Financial Times*, June 30 2013). The story focused on a survey of 1,500 people by KPMG (May 2013) which suggested the possibility of intergenerational conflict in the workplace with 46% of respondents agreeing with the proposition that older members of staff should retire so that younger workers could have a genuine chance of promotion. It was noted that “six years of economic stagnation have meant that many are holding onto their jobs”.

However, as with most of the issues and ideas reviewed in this book, it is risky to generalise. A lifetime career in a sector or large organisation is still possible. But – and it’s a big but – career management in what is an uncertain environment, calls for a far more sophisticated approach than in the past and your own ambitions need recalibration on a regular basis. For the individual the challenge is “how do I engage with my organisation and/or the employment market, in a way that gives me more control over my current and future career path?”

Whatever the scenario, a lack of self-awareness can derail this process and this book will enable you to test out your feelings and thinking from a range of perspectives. Perspectives are important; as the owner/manager of your own career and brand, how much of yourself do you generally see? And how often do you proactively seek feedback on your approach and prospects? Without this capacity to take a helicopter view of yourself – and inviting others’ observations as part of the process – you are less likely to make sense of the environment in which you are trying to shape your career.

And where will jobs of the future come from along with the people with the skills to perform them? On the macro level there are always indications in the shape of government funding for particular projects such as infrastructure. The most recent (2013) data on applications for university places in the

UK show the biggest increases over the previous year coming in computer sciences and engineering; and social services, arts and languages recording the biggest fall.

Depending on sector, geography and market conditions it is always good to get a sense of where your organisation sees the condition of its own talent pipeline. Spikes in demand can and do create the opportunity to make a move. The European insurance industry has experienced both demand and shortages as the Solvency II Directive necessitated significant hiring by insurers and consultancies, increasing salaries and attracting individuals to contract roles.

The challenge of “going where the future is” has taken on a significant trans-border dimension which was illustrated in June 2013 by the BBC’s Gavin Hewitt. He reported that: “For many, Germany is the land of opportunity and jobs. In 2012, 45,000 Italians moved to Germany. The Spanish were not far behind, with 37,000 heading in the same direction; 35,000 Greeks also left for Germany. Germany needs these migrants. The Association of German Engineers says it wants 70,000 engineers immediately. When scientists and IT specialists are included, the figure goes up to 200,000.” He noted that to help this need to be fulfilled, Germany is investing one billion euros (£848m; \$1.3bn) in funding apprenticeships for young people in places like Spain and Portugal to support their search for work in Germany.

In a thoughtful piece in *“The Guardian”*, Sonia Sodha observed that: “The question savvy 18-year-olds will increasingly ask is, ‘What will my degree be worth?’ Plenty of graduates find themselves in “graduate” jobs that wouldn’t have required a degree ten years ago...some jobs will always require an academic degree. But there are some...where employers might be better off training young people on the job on an apprenticeship