One Company’s Approach to CAREER PATH SUCCESS

As organizations continue to navigate the recession and look toward the recovery, they will need to do everything they can — likely with limited resources — to strengthen employees’ focus on the skills needed to propel businesses forward, as well as recharge employees’ commitment and sense of optimism. Getting these priorities right will allow organizations to boost competitiveness and keep — as well as attract — great talent.

In a 2008 Hewitt Associates and Human Capital Institute study involving 700 senior talent leaders, titled The State of Talent Management: Today’s Challenges, Tomorrow’s Opportunities, only 48 percent of survey respondents said employees have a clear picture of skills they should build to support business growth.

By Bob Campbell with Scott Cohen, Ph.D., Hewitt Associates, and Charlene P. Allen and Susan Cromidas, CDM
This makes practical career paths that guide growth toward future-critical capabilities more important than ever. Constructed in smart new ways, career paths can play a pivotal role in an organization’s total talent management strategy, providing employees with clear messages about how to grow skills and succeed in step with the firm. To have this impact, career paths need to be constructed and conveyed in very different ways than traditional career development approaches, which tend to depict linear stair-step job sequences and don’t always reflect today’s need for dynamic, real-world pictures of progression.

This article shares how one industry-leading firm, CDM, took an innovative approach to career paths, showing employees how to aim their skill-building toward the greatest organizational impact and individual growth. What the company has learned and accomplished along the way is especially instructive now to help organizations spark spirit, energy and prospects for success, as well as renew a focus on competitive advantage.

**Background — CDM**

Founded in 1947, CDM is a consulting, engineering, construction and operations firm in Cambridge, Mass., with more than 4,500 employees in more than 100 global offices. In addition to providing sustainable, integrated solutions for water, the environment, transportation, energy and facilities around the world, CDM is equally committed to being the employer of choice for the best people in its industry. The firm places great emphasis on attracting and cultivating a workforce that shares a commitment to its core values and is dedicated to personal and professional growth. Central to achieving this is providing a clear picture of the skills needed to maintain CDM’s competitive advantage and provide rewarding career opportunities.

Several years ago, in response to an employee engagement survey that identified a need for more career planning tools and resources, CDM partnered with Hewitt Associates to build a set of clear, real-world career paths for employees that delineate skills needed for advancement while inspiring growth and professional development.

**Five Key Criteria**

**Principles Powering the New Approach**

CDM knew the corporate career development landscape was littered with unfulfilled promises. Across industries and job types, organizations report that their attempts to revitalize career messages and tools have had mixed results, failing to show employees how to grow in ways valuable to the business and themselves. The team identified five core criteria for success:

- **Accelerate guided growth.** The team realized that, if approached in the right way, career paths could achieve two important objectives at once: 1) provide energizing pictures of career growth options so achievers could see in CDM clear routes to future success, and 2) show how these opportunities hinge on building specific capabilities that the firm’s business strategy will increasingly require to fuel competitive strength and growth.

- **Be practical and straightforward.** Career paths would need to provide pragmatic, real-world information and examples that are assembled and illustrated in quick-to-grasp ways, directionally correct vs. exhaustively precise, and useable by managers and employees to facilitate meaningful career development discussions and planning.

- **Be replicable firmwide.** The approach to career paths would need to be universally applicable across CDM. This would reinforce talent management concepts and vocabulary shared by all disciplines. It would also provide route maps to cross-develop and cross-deploy employees, equipping them for increasingly global cross-discipline projects and giving them a rich picture of the array of CDM-wide opportunities.

- **Be part of a total talent system.** Building a career structure

**FIGURE 1: A FRAMEWORK FOR GAUGING GROWTH — REPRESENTATIVE FOUNDATION, PRACTICE AND MASTERY DEFINITIONS**

**Foundation**

- Possesses and continues to build basic knowledge and experiences; handles assigned work to contribute to discrete portions of total solutions; applies working knowledge of guidelines and standards to anticipate problems, provide workable solutions and execute work; asks about and begins to learn about broader/deeper dimensions of the topic and its interrelationships with other key content areas.

**Practice**

- Experience-based understanding of this topic enables sound recommendations and approaches, and assessment of priorities; performs independent work of substantive complexity in this area; participates in and initiates collaboration among key staff in this area — from cross-function to cross-organization — to deliver the best solutions; develops strategy and approach for moderate to complex projects; recommends and develops improvements to guidelines and standards.

**Mastery**

- Applies a comprehensive grasp of the topic to direct and advance all aspects of work; develops strategy and approach for the organization’s most complex issues in this area; creates advancements that contribute to standards of the practice; institutionalizes cross-organization approaches, protocols and knowledge-sharing; recognizes companywide resource to others involved in this area; provides guidance and review and develops guidelines and standards.
disconnected from other talent management processes/resources would immediately diminish the structure’s relevance and usefulness. The career structure had to be linked to CDM’s internal university for access to training, to performance management to synchronize capability areas key to both current performance and future prospects, and to job classification/grade/title structures to anchor career paths with existing success markers.

• **Legitimize “success in place.”** Career paths are needed to reinforce excellence in one’s current job as the primary vehicle for career success, with materials and messages focused on getting strong results in one’s current role, as well as showing ways to have increasing impact and value for the firm, with or without promotions.

Forging New Paths
Solving for Career Opportunity and Business Strength

To meet these five criteria and create career paths as real tools for staff and business growth, it made sense to start with one discipline cluster within CDM as a pilot. From that, the team could assess its value and leverage the approach to other discipline clusters in a phased strategy. The engineers and scientists cluster — the largest population within CDM — was the logical starting place.

Essential for this and all career paths to follow was a sponsor at the executive leadership level, as well as in-depth participation by senior managers. Also, buy-in and input from engineers and scientists at all levels of the organization would be a prerequisite for accuracy and adoption of the career path. Key stakeholders were engaged as functional expert teams, an executive sounding board and “red teams” to reality-test the new approach and critique work products for real-world CDM relevance and usability. And because the prototype career path would have to be replicable firmwide to create a universal career system (see criterion three), these groups also provided perspectives on how to build a career path tailored to engineers and scientists yet applicable to disciplines across the firm.

Applying the most straightforward approach was critical to success. Key steps included:

1. Confirm business-critical capability areas.
2. Set proficiency levels and performance measures.
3. Create time/growth progression maps.
4. Link to training and other talent processes.
5. Align grades, titles and other areas’ structures.

**Confirm business-critical capability areas**

To satisfy the first criterion, the career path needed to be grounded in the capabilities critical to achieving CDM’s mission and goals. This focus on business-critical capabilities helped employees see practical progression paths important for the business through which they could succeed.

Detailed sets of competency definitions wouldn’t provide this type of simple, cohesive picture of performance.

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**FIGURE 2: SHARPENING THE PICTURE OF PERFORMANCE — CAPTURING WHAT COUNTS**

**Performance Profiles Specify Performance Expectations in “3-D”**

- **Behaviors Needed to Succeed**
  - What employees need to DISPLAY — the behaviors constituting an effective approach to work

- **Skills and Know-How Key to the Role**
  - What employees need to DO — the actions and the decisions the work involves

- **Results and Outputs**
  - What employees need to DELIVER — the measurable outcomes and outputs expected
More granular by design, competencies are great tools for in-depth coaching and accurate hiring, and that’s important. But like prisms, they refract performance into so many facets that they can’t provide the kind of focused snapshot of business-critical capabilities employees could aim for and acquire. The team knew that the capability areas — once defined — could be underpinned by sets of job-based competencies, which serve as the learning/coaching tools for building strength in each capability area.

The team began by asking leaders and discipline experts questions like, “What must CDM be great at for us to continue to lead today and in the future?” Through high-energy, exploratory discussions, a set of key capability areas (see the six column headings in Figure 3 on page 70) emerged as the first step in a cohesive game plan for growth.

2 Set proficiency levels and performance measures
Delineating levels and measures of know-how is key to a career progression process, but this step often devolves into an exercise to wordsmith subtly nuanced skill/output differences, composing them in an attempt to justify and explain predetermined levels. The result often sounds like this: “Level one, client-aware; level two, very client-aware; level three, extremely client aware.”

CDM rejected this, instead pushing to recognize and describe only the real-world, plainly stated vs. academically described meaningful differences in performance — capturing and spotlighting the important, recognizable levels of output and contribution that performers demonstrate and coaches can help people recognize and reach.

Two important ideas helped CDM identify proficiency levels and measures highly useful to employees. The first was to apply three broad, universally applicable capability levels — foundation, practice and mastery — as an organizing structure for people’s thinking and assessment of current performance and future readiness criteria. Rather than “gates” to clear, these are reference points for comparing one’s skill attainment to the requirements of current and prospective job needs. The definitions are the jump-off point for technical, discipline-specific definitions and metrics illustrating career path skill progression. (See Figure 1 on page 66.)

The second idea was a new way to depict a job’s key requirements, to capture what matters to performance in a way that puts the essential expectations out front in a format that’s easy
to understand and discuss. Called “3D” role profiles or performance profiles, they’re a clear snapshot of what an effective performer in the job needs to display (behavioral competencies such as judgment, teamwork), do (technical proficiencies, know-how, duties) and deliver (measurable results/outputs). This 3D view of performance quickly captures what matters most in a way that works for employees and coaches in fast-moving business operations. (See Figure 2 on page 68.)

3 Create time/growth progression maps

Even with clear proficiency and performance metrics, what’s almost always missing in career systems are easily understood depictions of the go-forward opportunities for skills growth the company can offer and will value and support. What if the path could give employees in each job/function a graphical depiction of how CDM needed most people in a certain discipline cluster to grow over time?

With CDM’s cultural tenet of practical innovation guiding its work, the team generated and tested a number of ideas, and the result was unique visual/verbal descriptions of career possibilities that demystify growth opportunities without promising promotions, illustrated in the example that follows.

To assemble these, the team started with the six business-critical capability areas and their real-world progression/performance levels, identified in steps one and two. Then, senior employees and expert practitioners in the pilot group were convened to outline and reach consensus on how — over time and through successive levels — the firm will need most engineers and scientists to grow and expand their involvement in, mastery of and reliance on those six essential capabilities. This enabled the team to illustrate vertical time-and-growth progression maps in which the bottom of the graphic represents the start of one’s career, with foundation-level skills and impact principally in doing technical work. The relative width of the columns corresponding to each capability area then shift as time, proficiencies and roles advance upward, reflecting the opportunities likely available and, simultaneously, CDM’s projected requirements of most engineers and scientists in this area.

**FIGURE 3: CONVEYING BUSINESS-BASED CAREER OPPORTUNITIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Grades/Levels (Designation Process)</th>
<th>Technical Manager</th>
<th>Possible Titles/Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mastery (grades 8-10)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strategic market leader, technical services manager, practice leader, group leader, office leader, quality manager, lead practitioner, senior program manager (PM4), program manager (PM3), senior project manager (PM2), project manager (PM1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice (grades 7-8)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Group leader, subdiscipline leader, senior project manager (PM2), project manager (PM1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation (minimum grade 6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Technical specialist, task manager, project engineer/scientist, task leader</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doing Technical Work</td>
<td>Managing Projects and Tasks</td>
<td>Managing Technical Professionals</td>
<td>Technical Sales and Marketing</td>
<td>Mentoring and Staff Development</td>
<td>Contribution to Firm’s Stature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4 Linking to training and other talent processes
For the new career paths to be real resources for action, they must have explicit accessible connections to the firm’s learning and performance management systems, as well as to external professional development resources. The design team has made great progress on this linkage, and work continues as new and upgraded systems are added.

5 Align grades, titles and other areas’ structures
All career paths require “relative positioning” against other benchmarks staff look to for evidence of success. So it was important to level-set and anchor the career path against existing grade, level, title and reward structures, and with other job/family/path structures by identifying and illustrating the “on ramps and off ramps” between them. In fact, movement between career paths is allowed and encouraged. Career paths at CDM will always be dynamic and evolving as the firm grows and expands service offerings.

The intent of the career path is to be a road map rather than an answer key. Instead of creating an exhaustively precise map, which was impractical and could convey the false certainty and cumbersome detail often found in career path systems, the team aimed for these data (and resulting materials) to be directionally representative. The team also took a “three parts current reality, one part aspiration” approach to guide job experts to consider what’s possible and important now so these tools will ring true today, tempered by a view of emerging capability needs so the career system aims people toward CDM’s future competitiveness.

The ultimate goal was to create “coaching-friendly” tools — providing talking points and other supporting materials that managers find easy to use to engage employees in career development conversations. Now managers can easily show employees how they can expand their impact and help move the business forward.

Benefits Realized So Far
CDM has since replicated the following steps for three key areas of the business, with a number of important outcomes for the firm:
• A steady increase in employee engagement scores, specifically, in perceptions of career opportunity
• Significant jumps in scores in understanding career possibilities and in managers helping set solid development goals after tying the career paths to a new performance process
• High involvement of employees to innovate and enhance the paths; for example, new “foundation level” courses and new tutorials on applying the new career path to day-to-day work and career goals, which feature selected CDMers telling their career stories to illustrate possible progression
• Creation of two additional career paths addressing administrative and construction disciplines built around the fundamentals of the technical career path
• A strong differentiating factor on college campuses — many new employees state that the career paths were one of the reasons they selected CDM.

Conclusion
CDM has created career paths to reflect the full range of opportunities for growth and success available to employees in their current jobs as well as in other roles, and to signal to everyone the business-critical capabilities that will strengthen and so be increasingly valuable to the firm. This was important before the economic events of the past year, and is even more important now for helping current employees sustain a positive perspective and focus on what counts and for attracting more of the best talent to help build competitive advantage and momentum as the company moves from recession into recovery.

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