Book Agile Career Development

Lessons and Approaches from IBM

Mary Ann Bopp, Diana A. Bing and Sheila Forte-Trammell
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Recommendation

IBM's long-standing president, the legendary Thomas J. Watson Sr., and his son and successor, Thomas J. Watson Jr., always made sure IBM workers could advance in their careers by offering them superior employee development programs. Indeed, in his McKinsey Foundation Lectures, Watson Jr. contended that such visionary programs, plus other IBM traditions, contribute heavily to the corporation's success – even more than its remarkable technological achievements or much-copied organizational structure. IBM career development experts Mary Ann Bopp, Sheila Forte-Trammell and Diana A. Bing (now retired) explain the company's ongoing programming. They discuss what it does, why and how, even if that necessitates making some areas of their manual a little heavy on lists. *BooksInShort* recommends this detailed picture of IBM's superior career development activities to any human resources professional.

Take-Aways

- Firms that don't invest in employee development risk losing their competitive edge.
- Companies need to predict which skills they will need in the future, and to provide training and education that deliver those capabilities.
- Career development programs boost retention by keeping employees engaged and motivated. These programs are bigger motivators than money.
- People want recognition, financial security, friendships, self-esteem and self-actualization. They need "trust, hope, worthiness and competence."
- Provide your employees with the option of developing "vertically" by adding depth in a specific field or "horizontally" by learning numerous areas.
- Develop a database so you can easily match an employee to a job vacancy.
- Employee career-building programs also benefit managers, clients and shareholders.
- Managers should help employees develop achievable, appropriate career plans.
- Assign a mentor to new employees to help them acclimate to their new roles.
- Frequently evaluate your career development activities to make sure you are receiving a good return on your investment.

Summary

Career Development the IBM Way

Companies that want to compete must invest in developing their employees' career capabilities and expertise. This is particularly true in today's business climate, where management is complex and demanding, and economic conditions are increasingly challenging. To stay ahead, companies must be "agile" in all areas, including employee learning and career development.

"No matter the size of a company, career development is vital to its success and ability to grow."

IBM has long been a leader in employee career advancement. As it has grown and evolved over time, so has its employee-training package. Delivering a top-quality, flexible – or agile – career-development experience is vital to keeping employees engaged so that your company can retain good people. Superior career advancement programming gives employees the knowledge, skills and expertise the organization needs them to have. Career development is a subset of talent management, which has six main elements:

1. **"Develop strategy"** – To be useful, career development must cooperate with and support company strategy.
2. **"Attract and retain talent"** – To hire and keep good people, offer them appealing opportunities. Once they are onboard, help them advance.
3. **"Motivate and develop"** – An easily understood career development program encourages employees to better themselves and, in the process, to do better work for you.
4. **"Deploy and manage"** – Move employees around inside your company so they build expertise in numerous areas. Use "cross-unit projects" to accomplish this objective.
5. **"Connect and enable"** – Encourage "professional communities" to grow throughout your organization so employees learn from each other.
6. **"Transform and sustain"** – As business changes, so must your firm and its employees. Continuous transformation is the hallmark of agile, adaptive companies and employees.

   "The overall objective is to be sure that the right person with the right skills is on the right job, quickly and cost-effectively."

IBM manages its employee talent portfolio by anticipating which skills and aptitudes it will need its workers to have in the future, and by providing education that delivers those capabilities. It carefully hires people for staff or project positions who have – or quickly can develop – the right capabilities to do the work well. High-quality employee development has four main elements:

1. **"Expertise-based learning"** – Employees learn particular, knowledge-based skills.
2. **"Work-based learning"** – Training is integrated into tasks accomplished on the job.
3. **"Performance-based learning"** – Employees receive specific feedback on their work.
4. **"Worldwide integrated solutions"** – A corporation shares best practices and proven solutions by offering understandable information in the right context for each region.

   "Career paths of tomorrow have begun to take different shapes than the career paths of yesterday."

Collaboration in many forms breathes life into "experiential learning" and "knowledge transfer programs." At IBM, collaborative educational activities take one of four forms:

1. **"Apprentice programs"** – Students learn from skilled professionals.
2. **"Collaboration programs"** – The Internet makes virtual collaboration a practical reality.
3. **"Communities of practice"** – Employees share knowledge worldwide.
4. **"Learning portals"** – These primary connection points enable employees to contact "experts, mentors and coaches," and to join helpful social networks.

The Importance of Career Development

In 1954, renowned psychologist Abraham Maslow published *Motivation and Personality*, a study of the "hierarchy" of human needs. This pyramid of needs correlates with specific areas of the professional world, in this order of importance:

- **"Physiological needs"** – Remuneration and reward, including money.
- **"Safety needs"** – The security of having ongoing work.
- **"Belonging needs"** – Collegial relationships with co-workers.
- **"Esteem needs"** – Acknowledgement of accomplishments.
- **"Self-actualization needs"** – Advancement up the career ladder by achieving goals.

   "Technology is changing with breathtaking speed, affecting both the workforce itself, as well as the process of career management."

In this hierarchy of needs, money is only a partial motivator. Higher needs are often more meaningful incentives. Research indicates that employees' most common response when asked why they've left a job is "limited career growth or promotional opportunity." A study using Saratoga Institute survey results confirms that "80-90% of employees leave for reasons related not to money, but to the job, the manager, the culture or work environment." It lists four other key motivators: the need to feel "hope, trust, competence and worthiness."

Career Paths

As employees acquire new knowledge and skills, they build valuable capabilities. Such increased "individual capability" – which adds up to increased "organizational capabilities" – takes time to unfold, but it is crucial to maintaining a competitive posture. At IBM, career development is a defined, organized and monitored process. The company seeks the right employees, trains them, measures the results and incorporates any needed changes so the process works efficiently. Advancement and career development are integral elements of IBM's three-part "expertise management system":

1. **"Competencies"** – All IBM employees must possess the ability to do their work.
2. **"Skills"** – People acquire particular areas of expertise to do specific jobs.
3. **"Capabilities"** – As employees develop, they add additional useful abilities.

"Four generations of employees might well be sitting side-by-side with different needs and desires as to their careers, [so] flexibility in how these employees are developed is mandatory."

IBM offers employees a carefully planned framework for building these areas of career development. Highly skilled employees can move up "vertically" to increasingly senior positions in specialized areas. Or, people can advance "horizontally" by learning many fields. The emergence of the "versatilist" – as opposed to the 1980s "generalist" and the 1990s "specialist" – is a significant contemporary trend. "Versatilists" can widen their "portfolio of roles, knowledge, insight, context and experiences" to reach corporate goals. These flexible employees can step in and efficiently handle diverse projects. IBM now offers a special career path to move versatilists through lateral job changes so they gain broad experience.

"IBM's learning goals are intricately linked to its global business strategy, and this is amplified by the company's investments in learning and development."

Another notable career advancement trend is modern companies' need to build employees who can work anywhere. An international corporation like IBM must operate effectively in many different cultures. Individuals who have the language abilities and professional talents to work globally can expect enhanced careers at any corporation. IBM's huge employee database details the specific capabilities people need to perform well in certain jobs. This "expertise taxonomy" helps managers deploy people with the right array of abilities to fill any IBM job worldwide. This carefully structured "career framework" enables staff members to "acquire, develop and apply the skills needed to drive business results, while providing them with the opportunity to advance and grow their careers." A formal career development plan is good for these stakeholders:

- **"Benefits to employees"** – Staff members who receive good career development services can advance their careers, acquire and polish valuable skills, identify promising future work-related goals and deliver superior value to the company and its clients.
- **"Benefits to managers"** – The career development plan helps supervisors select the right employees for assignments, and motivate and retain quality workers, thus limiting turnover. It also gives managers a precise read on their overall personnel resources.
- **"Benefits to clients"** – Motivated, well-trained workers produce better goods, so customers are more satisfied.
- **"Benefits to shareholders"** – Superior goods and services do better in the marketplace.

Find the Right Employees

Before you can hire new people, you must identify the competencies that your firm needs. This involves not only lining up people with specific talents and knowledge, but also finding those who have certain attitudes and ways of behaving that clients and customers value. Job interviewers use specific questions to focus on these competencies and to ascertain how well applicants will embody them on the job.

"An organization's expertise portfolio and talent management should be under constant evaluation to determine whether or not the company is poised to meet client needs, market demands and market volatility."

Once IBM hires someone, managers assign an experienced "buddy" to the new employee. The buddy helps the new hire acclimate during the first 60 days on the job. IBM also provides a full orientation program to help all new employees learn about the company's "history, culture, values and strategic vision." Orientation, which takes place over an extended period of time, includes classroom activities, online learning and "touchpoint" presentations of important company topics. Additionally, the "New IBMer Zone," a Web site for internal use, provides valuable information exclusively for new employees.

"The real difference between success and failure of a corporation can very often be traced to the question of how well the organization brings out the great energies and talents of its people." (Thomas J. Watson Jr.)

Any career building program needs "learning modules" that employees can study to improve their skills and enhance their careers. IBM uses an "Expertise Assessment" to help employees assess how their competencies match the company's expectations for top people in their positions. This is how IBM tells employees what talents they must acquire to advance within the company. People who want to move up easily can find out which specific "skill development activities" are available, and when, to help them position themselves for better jobs. With this information, IBMers can plan how and when they will secure the proficiencies they need to advance.

Goal-driven Education

Managers at IBM help employees define realistic career development goals and take satisfying, meaningful action to achieve them. Managers must know how to redirect those who hold unrealistic or unreasonable objectives. Managers should help employees aim for sensible, attainable career goals by guiding them to select and pursue the right educational activities in order to move ahead. Once managers approve individual educational plans, employees are responsible for executing them, though supervisors monitor their progress.

Opportunities for Learning and Mentoring

Employees build their careers through prescribed educational programming. Companies offer instruction in many different formats, including classroom lectures, online training, assigned reading and study, and on-the-job practice. IBMers benefit from a variety of job-based training methods, including challenging "stretch assignments," cross-unit projects and "job rotations." Mentoring is also a popular, effective element of IBM's experiential learning. Mentors supply the know-how employees need to grow in their jobs or move up. Often, employees have several mentors, and mentors work with several employees. Mentoring fills knowledge gaps, spurs collaboration, builds IBM's personality as a "learning organization" and helps it deliver the best possible goods and services.

Monitor and Evaluate Program Effectiveness

Career development activities must earn a sound return on the company's investment (ROI). Confirming that ROI requires rigorous monitoring and measurement. IBM managers survey employees after orientation, and after two months, three months and a year on the job. IBM asks new employees to report on what they've learned and asks them if they are satisfied with their career development education. Managers try to ascertain if IBM is deriving specific "organizational benefits" (that is, more

productivity, better sales and heightened morale) from its career programs. The company also conducts a "workplace effectiveness survey" asking employees to rate these programs and processes. Data collection is essential to determining if your career development program is meeting its goals.

About the Authors

Mary Ann Bopp is in charge of career development at the IBM Center for Learning and Development, where **Sheila Forte-Trammell** is a learning consultant. Now retired, **Diana A. Bing** was IBM's director of enterprise learning.