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**FIVE WAYS CAREER EXPECTATIONS ARE  
EVOLVING – AND HOW YOU CAN ADAPT  
YOUR ORGANISATION TO MEET THEM**

# **CAREERS OF THE FUTURE**

White paper by Sarah Quataert & Prof Dr Dirk Buyens

# CAREERS OF THE FUTURE

## INTRODUCTION

Wind the clock back a couple of decades, and you'd find a very different workplace. The unspoken agreement between employer and employee back then was one of security. Loyal employees worked 9-5, and in return got a job for life and opportunities to make their way steadily up the ladder.

Just two decades on and the world of work is transformed. Agile working practices and flatter structures mean vertical progression isn't always possible. At the same time, younger professionals know they'll be working for more years than their predecessors – so they want it to count. They're actively seeking out experiences and opportunities that align with their own personal values and goals.

All of which means that instead of loyalty to a company, today's professionals are more likely to be loyal to their own careers. For HR teams needing to attract and retain the best possible talent, this can be challenging.

This white paper looks at five career trends that have evolved over recent decades. And it sets out how your organisation can – and must – respond to them to offer stimulating, rewarding opportunities for individuals to craft professional lives that best suit them.

## FIVE CAREER TRENDS FOR TODAY'S PROFESSIONAL WORLD

Vlerick's Centre for Excellence in Strategic Talent Management has identified five career trends that have changed dramatically over the past few decades. These shifts are forcing organisations to change their approach to career development. A one-size-fits-all career path no longer exists. Instead, HR teams must provide frameworks and structures for people who want to craft their own journeys through professional life.

We've set out what each principle means for individuals and the organisations they work in. And we've made suggestions for how you can refresh your organisation's career management practices so you can offer an environment that attracts and retains the best talent.



## TREND ONE

# FROM COMPANY LOYALTY TO CAREER LOYALTY

Until a few decades ago, careers almost certainly consisted of a job for life at one company – with progression up the ladder until retirement. The company offered financial security and opportunities to progress to senior roles – and they were repaid with loyal and hardworking employees.

This specific career path still happens today – but it's much rarer. In today's business environment, competition for top talent is fierce and job security is less important. This means individuals have become less loyal to one organisation – and more loyal to themselves and the life and career path they want to pursue.

Partly this is down to the changing role of the employee. People are encouraged to set their own goals, manage their development and take responsibility for their own success.

In some ways, the idea of a “career” has changed from being a means of earning money to being a means of learning. So if someone feels dissatisfied with their role, they don't see moving on as being disloyal – they see it as an opportunity to learn something new.

Career paths are highly individual and can take many different forms. For some people, a lifelong career within one company is still a goal. And many people still spend considerable lengths of their professional lives in one organisation. Indeed, the average length of tenure in Belgium is 10.8 years. This shift also doesn't mean that “job hopping” is the new normal. But it does mean that when people choose to change jobs, the most common reason is because they don't have opportunities to grow.

## HOW TO ENCOURAGE COMPANY LOYALTY ALONGSIDE CAREER LOYALTY

In the past, HR generally took responsibility for career development. But now, employees are firmly in the driving seat. So HR teams have a new role – to facilitate and support employees and give them the tools and resources to manage their own careers.

To do this effectively, individuals need specific skills like self-awareness, proactiveness, asking for feedback and networking. These are skills HR can help professionals to master – through strategic investment in learning and development programmes and creating a stimulating work environment. And if you know your employees are making decisions

based on their own career goals, you can frame messages around career progression accordingly. So as well as explaining how a new skill could help someone in their current role, you should also explain how it will help them stand out in the job market.

Crucially, you need to communicate regularly with your teams to understand their ambitions. Rather than wait for an appraisal, make sure people know the door is always open for discussion. By showing your teams that you support their personal ambitions, you'll encourage loyalty to your organisation.

## TREND TWO

# FROM CLIMBING THE LADDER TO ZIGZAGGING ACROSS FUNCTIONS

Internal structures are changing. In many businesses, the hierarchical pyramid has been replaced by flatter structures with less centralisation. At the same time, agile working practices are resulting in more flexible ways of working. Project-based and team-based working is becoming more common.

This is contributing to a change in career mindset. Fewer layers mean there are fewer opportunities for vertical progression – so organisations need to offer alternative pathways. Many are moving from defined, vertical career pathways towards cross-functional role thinking that allows individuals to adapt and respond quickly.

These zigzag career paths within an organisation offer employees more than

vertical promotion. Typically, they cross between three ladders. The first two are managerial and expert – where people can move from junior to senior level. The third is project – where they can take on different roles in a project team. Employees can make lateral or diagonal career moves that boost knowledge-sharing, help to break down silos and crucially, build a workforce with rich and varied skills. And for international organisations, opportunities to work across borders can make these roles even more attractive.

These dynamic paths are a better fit for flatter, more agile organisational structures. And they're increasingly needed in future leaders – to make sure they have a holistic view of an organisation before they move into top management roles.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP PEOPLE PROGRESS THROUGH YOUR ORGANISATION

If your organisation's structure is becoming flatter, you need to give employees opportunities to take their careers in any possible direction – whether it's vertical, horizontal or diagonal. Moving from management to expert to project ladders should be easy and transparent – and give employees plenty of options for growth.

Internal mobility can take many forms. A new title or permanent promotion isn't always necessary – instead opportunities to learn continuously through short-term projects, job rotation and working internationally can be equally meaningful career moves. The way you organise work – for example,

terms of roles and projects – can make it easy for employees to zigzag. And for your organisation, it means you can put together the right team for each project, boosting productivity and results.

But remember, simply installing a three-ladder system isn't enough. You have to be prepared to adapt other HR processes too. For example, moves on managerial ladders shouldn't be financially rewarded more than moves on others. Consistency is important and roles on each ladder should be treated equally – otherwise employees won't be happy to advance across all three.

## TREND THREE

# FROM SALARIED EMPLOYEES TO A CONTINGENT WORKFORCE

The last decade has seen a significant shift in the types of workers that make up teams. Alternative labour markets like the gig economy, freelancers and temporary and interim workers – known as contingent workers – are booming. And they've gone global at a very fast pace. Well-known cases such as Uber and Deliveroo aren't alone – many companies are now relying on alternative forms of employment to deliver key activities.

Many people who've previously been salaried employees are finding these forms of work attractive. They offer more freedom,

flexibility, and the ability to do work you really want to focus on.

Some people rely solely on freelance opportunities. Others craft portfolio careers, combining independent work with part-time roles or other forms of work – and deciding how, where, when and with whom to collaborate.

**In 2018, there were 440,000 independent workers active in the Belgian labour market.**

## HOW YOUR ORGANISATION CAN EMBRACE ALL TYPES OF WORKER

If you know professionals are increasingly looking to try alternative forms of employment, then it makes sense to offer alternative working options – such as reducing hours so they can take on a second career path elsewhere. Don't see this as a loss for your company. Even if an employee is working fewer hours, they can become even more valuable when they have external insights and stronger skillsets to bring to their roles.

As well as supporting employees who may want to explore new ways of working, HR teams need to manage a broader career marketplace – of both internal talent and external gig workers, contractors and other non-traditional workers. This will give your organisation the ability to respond quickly to demand for certain skillsets, regardless of the talent source.

Making contingent workers part of your talent strategy comes with challenges – in particular,

how you include all segments of the workforce equally. Many organisations have a sharp divide between payrolled employees and independent contractors – in terms of access to benefits, learning and development programmes and teambuilding. But as non-traditional work forms become more and more popular, this divide can have a negative impact on company culture. HR teams need to keep all workers engaged and committed – with inclusive processes for onboarding, appraisal and career management.

And of course, as with all HR-related activity, transparent communication is vital to successfully managing your organisation's talent portfolio. You need to involve everyone as much as possible – in informal moments as well as through structured activities. And you need to be absolutely clear about roles and responsibilities for everyone involved in your organisation, regardless of their working status.

## TREND FOUR

# FROM LINEAR TO TRANSITIONAL CAREERS

Another career trend that's increasingly appealing to professionals is taking a career break or sabbatical in between paid jobs. Known as transitional career thinking, this gives people opportunities to have experiences outside the workplace. Many of these experiences can indirectly contribute to their professional development. And it's a path people choose for many reasons – including childcare, volunteering, education and a desire to travel.

The traditional career ladder is being replaced by career waves. Each wave represents a new adventure where professionals gain skills and knowledge, followed by an opportunity to rest or embark on a new wave. Organisations are increasingly becoming more open to offering these career pauses. And as the retirement age increases worldwide, a need for a healthy work-life balance is becoming more and more important.

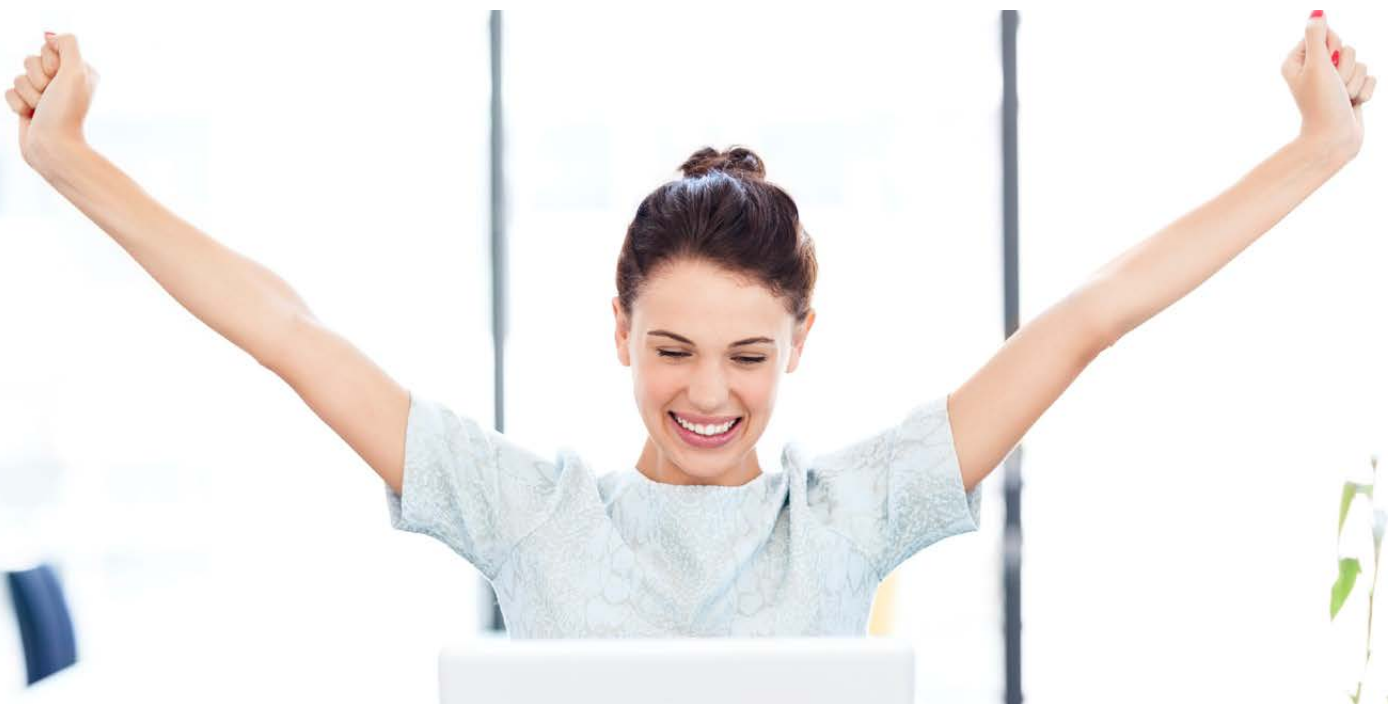
## SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES WHO WANT TO PRESS PAUSE

If you know your people are likely to want a career break or sabbatical at some point, it makes sense to incorporate opportunities for this into your policies. A career break policy that sets out clear eligibility requirements, a transparent application process and robust terms and conditions can help to make sure this process is fair and efficient.

To make this work in both your organisation and your employees' interests, preparation is absolutely essential. It involves defining set departure and return dates – and crucially, making sure there are no negative

consequences for team members who may have to pick up on their absent colleague's workload or responsibilities.

Giving employees opportunities to achieve greater work-life balance is of course a very human-centric HR policy. But it can benefit your organisation too. Employees who take time off can return with new skills, experiences or even new languages. And this can only help to enrich your company's talent pool and make your organisation more productive and successful.



## TREND FIVE

# FROM WORKING FOR MONEY TO WORKING FOR A PURPOSE

Across the business world, priorities are changing. Profit is no longer the only thing that matters – sustainability and corporate social responsibility are becoming increasingly important to organisations and the people who work in them.

Individuals are seeking careers where they can make a meaningful difference – and are more likely to go the extra mile when the organisation they work for has a clear purpose.

On average, employees say they would sacrifice 23% of future lifetime earnings to have a meaningful career until they retire.

So career opportunities that give employees purposeful experiences are becoming more and more necessary. These experiences can be anything from learning a new skill, making a difference to a colleague or client's life or having permission to work on a personal project.

Another emerging trend is the “encore career” – where people choose to spend the later years of their professional lives pursuing purpose-driven work with a social impact. These jobs are usually in public life – such as education, health and the environment. Non-profit organisations already rely on retirees who are willing to volunteer – but as the retirement landscape changes, it's becoming clearer that all organisations need to offer purposeful roles for all ages. Otherwise, they risk people leaving to find meaning elsewhere.

## HOW TO OFFER OPPORTUNITIES TO FIND PURPOSE AT WORK

When it comes to career management, “purpose” refers to the drive behind the career decisions people make. Why do they aspire to certain roles more than others?

As the boundaries between life and work continue to blur, people increasingly come to work to derive meaning from life. So it makes sense to give your team members a clear definition of what your company stands for. Then individuals can decide if they're inspired by your purpose and want to get on board with it.

The next thing to do is make people feel fulfilled after a day at work – so making sure they're doing work that aligns with their talents and values. You can offer individual career counselling – to help people identify

their personal purpose and translate it into the way they work. You can also create opportunities for job crafting – empowering employees to manage the tasks they do, who they work with and where.

Finally, don't be afraid of employees who look for meaningful experiences outside of your organisation. Depending on their own goals and values, they may want to take on an additional job or activity. So be open to discussing opportunities for voluntary work or part-time work elsewhere. Send a strong signal to your teams that you're genuinely willing to listen to and help them meet their needs – and you'll build stronger, longer-lasting relationships with them.



## THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT CAREERS IS CHANGING... MAKE SURE YOUR ORGANISATION IS READY

These are exciting times for HR professionals. HR roles are changing – from managing career paths to facilitating and supporting employees and workers who want to craft their own professional journeys. Indeed, there is no longer a defined “career path” to follow. Instead there are countless pathways depending on each individuals’ needs and ambitions.

This of course comes with challenges for HR and talent management – from managing a wider, more varied workforce to adapting processes and policies to suit all types of employee. But it brings opportunities too – to build teams of people who are motivated, engaged and dedicated to their goals, which can only benefit the organisations they work in.

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