

Shaping the Future: Connecting Career Development and Workforce Development (International Symposium on Career Development and Public Policy, Sydney, 2006)

Synthesis of Country Papers

SESSION 4 (THEME C): CAREER DEVELOPMENT FOR ADULTS AT WORK (WORKFORCE ADAPTABILITY)

1 Introduction

Career development is seen as having a significant role to play in achieving the objective of upskilling the existing workforce so that employees can adapt to evolving skill requirements. It is cited as an important, though rarely operationalised response to a range of workforce management problems/issues (skill shortages; the increasing rate of technological change resulting in people's existing skills becoming outdated coupled with an ageing population) that confront employers. The role of career development in improving recruitment and retention practices or the quality of working life was less often described.

2 Key Issues and Strategies

2.1 Limited Access

The body of research on career development in workplaces is not large and Canada and the UK suggest that career development services in workplaces need to be mapped and the effectiveness of strategies assessed.

The OECD Study observed, and countries papers confirm, that in all countries represented, employed adults, especially those in small to medium sized organizations, have limited if any access to career development services. There is a gap in the provision of services for employed adults to help sustain their employability and to encourage career self-management throughout the life span. Even in the UK, where it is recognised that employers play an important role in delivering career development services in the workplace, greater access for existing workers is an important policy objective. One of Careers Scotland's strategic aims, for example, is to develop people who are in work.

The key stated objectives for employed workers include supporting individuals to achieve their ambitions through better information, advice and guidance; creating stronger links between employers and the career development community; and encouraging the role that employers and trades unions play in encouraging learning and work development.

The use of online career information and guidance in some countries (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Wales) enhances access to career information for employed workers. However, this seems to be an individual activity rather than part of an employer-sponsored workforce development strategy.

In most cases countries are seeking to expand access for employed adults, by seizing the opportunities inherent in broader skills development, employment or human resource development strategies that have traction in their countries. For example, Canada suggests that while the government's Workplace Skills Strategy does not explicitly highlight the role of career development, there is an opportunity for the links to be made.

2.2 Embedded in Skills Development Strategies

Meeting the demand for higher-level skills is an increasingly important objective in many national educational and labour market policies. Efforts to up-skill the labour force, including those already in employment, are reported by many nations. Career development is seen as having a role to play in engaging people in such employer/government sponsored skills development initiatives (Ireland), and in particular in encouraging people to have their prior learning recognized (Denmark and Canada). Ireland notes that career guidance gives employees the confidence to avail themselves of available learning and work opportunities. Austria suggests that it should be a priority in skills programs for adults enabling them to anticipate and adapt to new skill requirements.

2.3 Embedded in Human Resource Development Strategies

In some countries the vehicle to give prominence to career development is through human resource development policies/strategies. One of the strategic objectives of South Africa's HRD Strategy is described as "increasing employer participation in life long learning" and one success indicator is

specified as *public sector education and training* to support service delivery, in addition to private sector commitment to skills development. However, it is noted that even in the public service there is a gap between the vision and the reality.

2.4 Embedded in Employment Strategies

New Zealand notes that the government has broadened the focus of its employment strategy, placing *greater emphasis on the quality of work and the rewards from it*. The strategy, "Better Work, Working Better", aims to achieve high quality employment in industries, regions and businesses. It would seem that greater employer responsibility for the ongoing development of employees is implied in this strategy.

2.5 Not a Homogenous Group

Several papers note the diversity of need within the employed workforce, including workers in transition; the underemployed; those with family responsibilities; the working poor; those with low level qualifications or skills; the well educated; and individuals with high levels of education and training who are looking for a mid-life career change.

Both NZ and South Africa draw attention to the significant number of people in the workforce with low literacy, numeracy and language skills, which restricts their ability to adapt to changing workplace demands.

Older workers wishing to modify their career activity without withdrawing completely and older workers wishing to keep up with technology and other changing workplace dynamics are considered to have particular needs. The Australian National Strategy for Ageing asserts that "opportunities should exist for Australians to make a lifelong contribution", and a government website is dedicated to promoting mature age employment, as a key strategy for managing the impact of demographic change. Botswana, in noting that much more needs to be done in retaining the skills of older workers, reminds us of the complementary roles of career practitioners, employers and policy developers in retaining older workers, and the importance of lobbying and advocacy. Italy advocates that older workers should be a priority group for workforce development strategies and suggests that policy makers have been slow to mobilize career development services in support of active ageing. The USA paper reports that the absence of career services for the active older worker is evidence of a structural lag between services and programs and the reality of an ageing population. While the USA reports signs of some proactive responses by some American companies, it concludes that career services for older workers, where they are available at all, lack government funding support and are disconnected from services that support positive ageing.

2.6 A Shared Responsibility

Several countries assert that responsibility for career development should be shared between employers, governments and employees (including employee associations/unions). Botswana notes that despite government expectations that social partners will help in the development of social capital few private sector employees have access to development programs.

Interestingly most examples of strong partnering arrangements, such as Norway's Partnerships for Career Guidance, focus on career development for young people – the emerging workforce. Their focus, therefore, is on recruitment, rather than retention of workers, suggesting a lack of understanding of career as a developmental process. In Canada, the Petroleum Sector Council is working with career development specialists to explore outreach strategies to attract more non-traditional workers. While this is encouraging, there is little evidence in the papers of similar considerations being given to career development as a retention strategy.

Ireland suggests that funding arrangements for employed workers need to take into account the capacity of the individual to pay for services received in order to ensure financial sustainability. Poland suggests that employer and trade union funds should be used to finance services for workers. In England, Scotland and Wales, the launch of the Union Learning Fund has been a major catalyst for the development of the role of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) in the workplace.

2.7 Links between employers and career development community are not well established

As Canada notes, connections between the career development community and industry/business/labour are not well established and employers do not readily identify the career

development agenda as relevant or helpful to them. Furthermore, career practitioners did not rate the priority issues facing employers as high priorities for their practice. Links between the career development sector and the business community sector (especially small to medium sized enterprises) are not well developed and there is concern that the career community has not proven its case to business/industry in terms of the contribution of career development to productivity, worker motivation, organizational “fit” and the return on investment.

3 Questions for discussion

Questions arising from the country-paper contributions on this theme include:

- What is the most effective way of raising the profile of ‘career’ and its potential for actively supporting the key workforce management goals of employers? How can employers and trade unions best be engaged?
- How can the perceived dilemma/conflict in serving the needs of employers and the needs of employees in the workplace be resolved for career development practitioners?
- What role can/should governments play in encouraging employer-based provision of services?

Christine Haines

4.4.06