

HOW TO SELL CAREERS TO THE EMPLOYEES YOU WANT TO KEEP? A MARKETING APPROACH ON CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *In an increasingly competitive economy, employees are the ones who make the difference between organizations. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the relationship between career marketing and gaining competitive advantage. The literature review conducted for this paper shows that candidates are looking for companies that provide opportunities for their career development and that organizational commitment has been replaced by career commitment. The author has drawn up a conceptual framework of career marketing that shows how marketing techniques can be applied to design career development programs and to gain competitive advantage.*

Key words: *career marketing, employee retention, professional development, competitive advantage*

1. Introduction

In an era of knowledge economy, where the competitive advantage is based more on intellectual abilities and less on physical assets (Powell and Snellman, 2004), organizations have begun to treat their employees as valuable assets. Thus, since the early 1990s, employee development has become an integrated part of business strategy in most organizations (Lam, N. et al., 1999, p. 23). Employers should choose a career development strategy either by recruiting already trained employees or by cultivating their own talents (Armstrong, 2009). Whichever strategy they choose, companies must offer the possibility of learning and constantly developing and designing career-products that anticipate the future professional development needs of internal customers.

Employees do not want a simple job, but a career, a lifestyle that is compatible with their personality and professional orientation. The lack of professional development opportunities determines employees to seek development of their careers in other organizations (Weng, McElroy, Morrow and Liu, 2010). Given that employers appreciate more the experience and knowledge of employees than the positions they held, individuals look for organizations that provide career development opportunities as well as the opportunity to apply their abilities.

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The increased competition on the labor market forces organizations to provide well-defined career plans that best meet the employees' professional development needs. They can not compel employees to remain in the company, except through coercive labor contracts, but their application will have an undesirable effect on the employer brand. Thus, employers should use marketing techniques to create dream careers and to sell them in order to keep the best employees.

2. Research Methodology

The performance of an organization is directly related to its ability to retain highly qualified employees. The assumption from which the study starts is that employees can be kept in the organization through career marketing strategies. The main objective of the paper is to identify all the relevant aspects that should be considered in order to design and implement effective career marketing strategies and to draw up a conceptual framework of career marketing.

Starting from the idea that career marketing is an interdisciplinary concept, a selective literature review was conducted and it includes different reports, books, empirical and conceptual papers in the fields of management, marketing, human resources, psychology, and organizational behaviour. The papers were chosen based on the following keywords: career marketing, employee retention, professional development, organizational commitment, competitive advantage, turnover.

3. Literature Review

The importance of attracting and retaining talented employees has become an increasingly researched topic in the literature. Some studies are suggesting that the employees' turnover intention may be influenced by human resource practices (Pirzada et al., 2013; Abdulkareem et al., 2015). While other studies have revealed the influence of career development on organizational commitment and turnover intention (Cappelli, 2000; Ito and Brotheridge, 2005; Ahmad, N.A. and Daud, S., 2016). However, there is little evidence about the application of marketing techniques in designing career development programs in order to reduce the turnover rate of talented employees and to gain competitive advantage (Grajdieru and Ciongradi, 2017). This seems to be a gap in the existing literature, especially as companies began to use more and more marketing practices in the field of human resources in order to win the war for talent (Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod, 2001).

Arthur, Hall and Lawrence (1989) conducted a transdisciplinary analysis, showing how the term `career` was defined in various fields, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and history. In the field of economics, career was defined as `a response to market forces: a viewpoint emphasizing the near-term distribution of employment opportunities and the long-term accumulation of human capital` (Becker, 1975 in Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989, p. 10), suggesting the importance of employee retention. However, this approach limits the concept of career to the idea of having `a job for life` within the organization, without referring to

advancement or professional development opportunities. Bird (1994, p. 326) considers career as a repository of knowledge, skills, expertise and professional relationships obtained through the progressive evolution of work experience over time. This approach is more complex and includes both the idea of succession of jobs over time and the experience, skills and tacit knowledge acquired due to these jobs.

Grăjdieru and Ciongradi (2017, p. 49) define the concept of career marketing as 'applying commercial marketing techniques to organizational career planning activities designed to attract and retain talented people within the company in order to increase the quality and performance of human resources'. Thus, the application of marketing techniques in career management involves treating employees as clients, segmenting internal clients according to professional aspirations and training needs, and designing career development programs specific to each target group. This approach is in line with the explanation of internal marketing given by Berry and Parasuraman (1991, p. 151), which state that internal marketing involves treating jobs as products that should meet the needs of internal clients in order to attract, develop, and retain the best employees. However, human needs change over time and that is why organizations should design products capable of anticipating employee needs. It is not just about a job, it is about experiences and a sequence of jobs that an individual occupies over time, it is about a career. Yet, similar to job-products, designing attractive career products involves the application of marketing techniques internally.

Many companies claim that they offer career development opportunities, but do they meet the needs of employees? Ahmed and Rafiq (2002, p. 25) suggest that sometimes 'product' sold to employees may be undesirable or could have a negative utility. The rigid career development programs still found in many organizations treat all employees in the same way. However, people are different, they have different personalities, abilities, needs, and desires. Therefore, career planning programs should be based on segmentation of employees, grouping them more by professional anchors (Schein, 1975), needs, and aspirations, rather than hierarchical levels and jobs. Organizations should pay more attention to the potential of employees at all hierarchical levels, not just the higher ones (Arthur, Rousseau, 1996; Lam, Duke and Duxbury, 1999).

The subjective career tends to become more important than the objective one (Weick and Berlinger, 1989). Hence, it is very important how employees perceive their chances of career development. A recent study shows that the employee's perception of the organization's support in career development for different job categories is a predictor of job satisfaction (Ismail, Adnan and Abu Bakar, 2014). Often individuals equate career development with advancement in the hierarchy. Unfortunately, this is not always possible, as economic and technological changes have led to the flattening of hierarchies. Therefore, it is challenging for managers to convince employees that lateral development or job enrichment are also opportunities for career development. This requires the application of marketing principles to the design and sale of careers. Firstly, the 'product' must correspond to the needs of the employees. Secondly, employees should perceive their chances of professional development as being bigger within the organization than by adopting a boundaryless career. Bird (1994, p. 342) states that there is also the possibility of creating a boundaryless career effect within a single

organization through lack of constraints, a greater attention to professional experiences and semantic aspects of careers, inter-company secondment and intensive socialization.

Employee loyalty to the organization has been replaced by career commitment (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Cappelli, 2000) and individuals tend to go to companies that offer them professional development opportunities. Although career development mechanisms increase organizational commitment (Weng et. al., 2010; Rasheed, Khawaja and Rasheed, 2013) and organizational performance (Khalid et al., 2015, p. 173), they also increase the employability of human resources in competing organizations (Cappelli, 2000; Preenen et al., 2011). Thereby, investing in employee career development can either lead to increased commitment to the organization, or may favour career mobility (Ito and Brotheridge, 2005), but this is a risk that organizations should assume if they want to cope with frequent changes in business environment.

Investing in professional development of employees allows differentiation and gaining competitive advantage, as it also increases the level of abilities and knowledge the organization can use to achieve organizational goals (Bird 1994, p. 328). Thus, career development programs need to be correlated with the needs of individuals as well as with organizational needs and strategic objectives (Lam, Duke and Duxbury, 1999, Armstrong, 2009, p. 591), which will help to gain competitive advantage. Furthermore, ensuring lifelong learning and encouraging the acquisition of new skills increases the organization's attractiveness in the labour market. The competition on the labour market has become as fierce as that on the consumer goods market (Berthon, Ewing and Hah, 2005), which is why the attractiveness of the organization as an employer is becoming increasingly important. The employer brand is actually the image of the company on the labour market, the mental representation of attributes related to its quality of employer (Collins and Kanar, 2013).

Given the dynamics of the labour market and the existence of more attractive opportunities that the organization cannot avoid (Cappelli, 2000), the resignation of talented employees would mean losing their experience and knowledge, which is an important source of competitive advantage (Ahmed and Rafiq, 2002, p. 173). Therefore, career marketing strategies should encourage socialization within the organization in order to transmit tacit knowledge to other employees.

Weng and Hu (2009, in Weng et. al, 2010) identified four components of career growth: career goal progress - how the current job contributes to the achievement of professional goals; professional ability development - how the current job allows the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, as well as their application in order to enrich the experience; promotion speed - perception of promotion opportunities; and remuneration growth - how the employee perceives salary growth. If the employer actively contributes to the achievement of career goals, employees will be more involved in meeting organizational goals, which will also lead to the strengthening of the psychological contract between the worker and the organization. Strong psychological contracts lead employees to fulfil certain commitments made to the organization, but only if they are convinced of their reciprocity (Rousseau, 2004, p. 120). Career development promises that are found in the psychological contract should be appropriately perceived by employees in order to meet their needs.

4. The Concept of Career Marketing

Based on the literature review conducted for this study, a conceptual framework of career marketing was drawn up, that links together several important issues from marketing, human resources management, psychology, and organizational behaviour fields. The proposed conceptual framework presented in Fig. 1. highlights all the relevant aspects that should be considered in order to design and implement effective career marketing strategies.

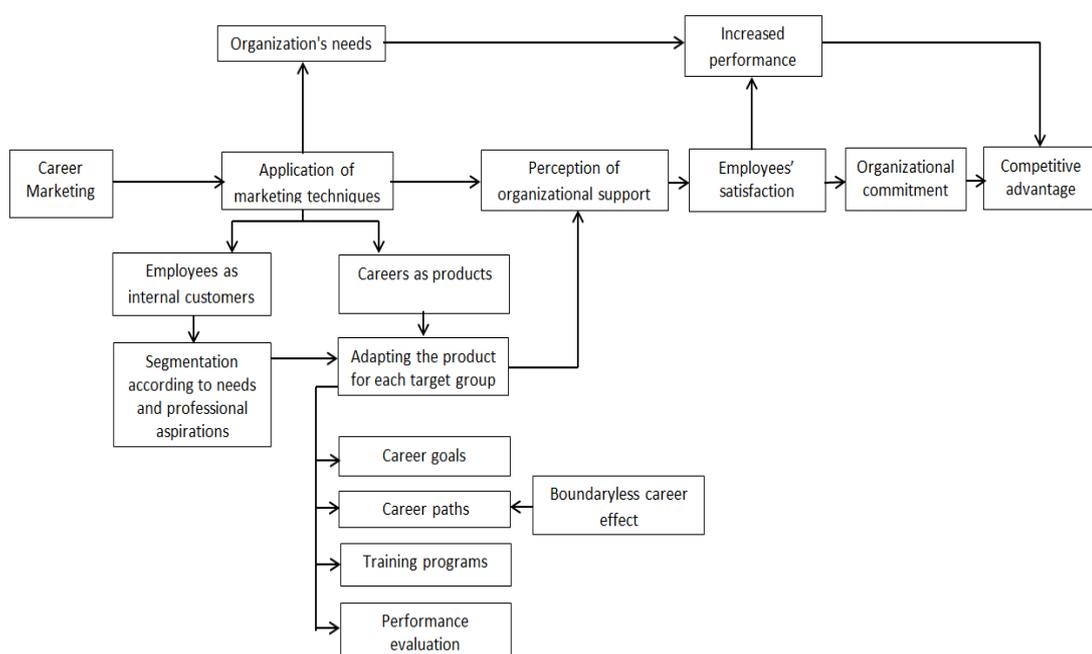


Fig. 1. *Conceptual framework of career marketing*

Source: *Author*

Treating employees as internal customers will allow their segmentation not according to the job or hierarchical position they occupy, but according to the professional aspirations and development needs of each individual. All employees should benefit from professional development programs, not just those at higher hierarchical levels (Lam, N., Duke, L. and Duxbury, L., 1999). Therefore, it is important to develop various career development programs adjusted to the needs of each category of employees. These programs should be as flexible as possible in order to create a 'boundaryless career effect', by offering a high degree of freedom and autonomy, where possible, as well as offering the opportunity to choose what projects to work on, providing tasks that require the application of knowledge acquired in training programs.

Treating careers as products allows designing them according to individual expectations, which could lead to an increased degree of perceived support for career development and to an increasing degree of job satisfaction. It is necessary to mention

that career marketing strategies cannot be applied if the basic needs have not been satisfied beforehand (Maslow, 1943). It is hard to believe that an individual will think about career development if he does not have satisfactory working conditions.

Employee professional satisfaction can increase work performance and commitment to the organization, thus meeting the organization's needs. By retaining the valuable employees in which the employer has invested and by using their improved skills and knowledge to achieve strategic goals, the company will gain competitive advantage.

The proposed conceptual framework represents a comprehensive conceptualization of career marketing, highlighting several implicit assumptions and connections that should be tested empirically.

5. Conclusions

Equal access to capital and technological resources have prompted organizations to focus their attention on the knowledge and skills of the employees in order to gain competitive advantage. Today it is no longer enough to provide a number of financial advantages and a stable job to keep valuable employees. It has to create a product that anticipates the employee's development needs, to offer a career development program.

The conceptual framework of career marketing presented in this paper highlights how marketing techniques can be applied to design career development programs and to gain competitive advantage by satisfying the employees' development needs. The companies should treat career programs as any other product of the organization and this `product` has to match the needs and expectations of employees, which represent the internal clients.

People are different, they have different personalities, abilities, needs, and desires. Therefore, career planning programs should be based on segmentation of employees, grouping them more by their needs, rather than hierarchical levels and jobs. Managers should create several career development programs tailored to each target group and provide training programs based on the assessment of the potential and performance of the employees, but also taking into account the needs and objectives of the company.

If the employer actively contributes to the achievement of career goals, employees will be more involved in meeting organizational goals. That is why the support for career development perceived by employees contributes to increased satisfaction, which results in increased performance, organizational commitment and competitive advantage. Career development programs should be flexible in order to adapt easily to the changing economic environment.

The career marketing strategies can be applied only if the basic needs have been satisfied. Therefore, before planning careers, managers must ensure that the organization has a fair rewarding policy and satisfactory working conditions.

This paper contributes to existing literature by creating a conceptual framework of career marketing and by highlighting several implicit assumptions and connections that should be tested empirically both in large organizations (over 500 employees), as well as in small organizations from different fields of activity to identify the differences of employees' perceptions depending on the professional qualifications and organizational

culture. Likewise, the study will contribute to acknowledging the need to implement marketing strategies to sell careers and products that anticipate the employee's development needs.

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