

Tools for Employee Development

As a human resource professional, part of your job is to help employees develop their skills and careers. Most of the time, that means helping them to do their jobs better. Sometimes, it means helping them to develop skills that they will eventually put to use in other organizations.

What happens when the choice to move on is not made by the employee? What if the choice is forced upon him or her by an organizational response to economic realities? How do you help an employee who is being laid off in an industry downturn, or whose job has been made redundant by a merger? The first article below discusses some practical tools for helping an employee make a new start with a new company.

But most development opportunities aren't that dramatic. When your mission is to help employees do their own jobs better—and maybe gain the skills to move on to other jobs in the organization—one of your more effective tools may be the familiar employee-performance appraisal.

Appraisals help to improve employee performance, and therefore, organizational performance. They can determine salaries and advancement opportunities. They point out areas in which training is needed.

As important as appraisals are, most companies aren't doing enough to train people in the process. Oh sure, managers are shown how to do their part, but in many cases, the employees are left in the dark.

When employees know what to do and say in the appraisal interview, they have more power over their own career development, and more commitment to the action plans that result from the interviews. And that can lead to performance appraisals that really make a difference. Here's an outline for a simple training program to help employees do their part in appraisal interviews.

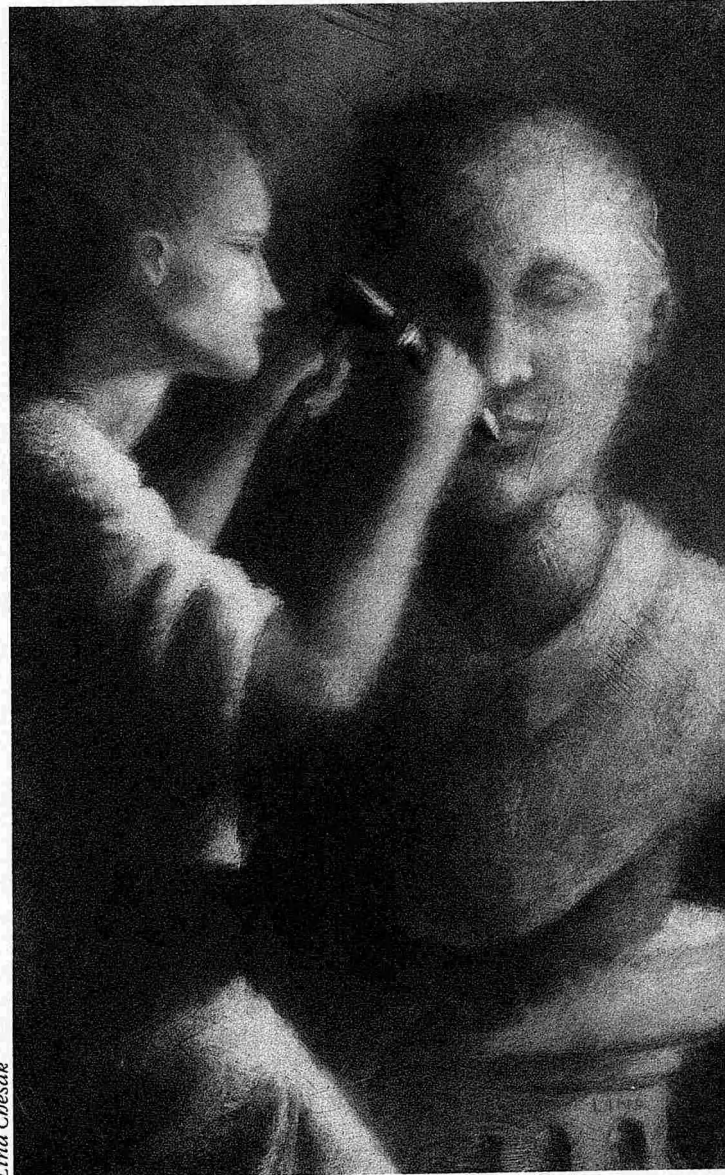
Get a Job

By Michael Shahnasarian,
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Downsizings, acquisitions, and mergers are forcing incredible numbers of people to re-enter the job market. In many of the affected organizations, human resource professionals are finding an addition to their list of "other duties as assigned": helping outplaced employees find jobs.

Many organizations are either unwilling or unable to assume the expenses of hiring outplacement firms. Yet, they are sincerely concerned about the welfare of their outplaced employees. The human resource professional is quite often looked to as a resource to provide cost-effective outplacement assistance.

Most people agree that being able to get a job is one of the most important of all skills that can be developed. The average person conducts eight job-search campaigns over her or his lifetime. We've all done it, but few admit to being good at it. Some practical ideas can help you to help outplaced employees get re-employed.



Lina Chesak

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Ready, set, stop

Too many people looking for jobs get started before they're ready. They hurry to follow-up on want ads, get leads from headhunters and the like, and flood the post office with unsolicited resumes.

When they do land interviews and the prospective employers ask, "Tell me, what type of position are you looking for?" they too often give either an answer they think the interviewer wants to hear or a vague, over-rehearsed response laced with such clichés as "more challenge," "growth potential," and "a chance to apply my skills."

Just as a good salesperson carefully screens and qualifies a prospective client before making a presentation, a well-prepared job seeker absolutely does not enter a job interview before answering two important questions:

- What is it that I want in my career, and how will the job I seek help to move me closer to my ultimate career goals?
- What organizations can provide the experiences that are critical to helping me progress down my aspired career path?

Those two questions are deceptively simple. Preparing the out-placed employee to re-enter the labor market should begin with a thorough self-assessment. Job seekers must carefully inventory their values, skills, interests, and life circumstances that might affect various career decisions. Until they do that, they are not ready to solicit job interviews and could be doing themselves a disservice by entering the job market prematurely.

Through counseling and, in some cases, vocational testing, you can help outplaced employees become more certain of the directions in which they want to guide their careers. Shortcuts inevitably lead to trial-and-error career development—a method unacceptable to true professionals.

Only after the job candidate is able to state clearly a career objective (once again, that is much simpler than it sounds) can he or she proceed with the job search. The next steps involve developing a

resume that reflects the desired objective and targeting organizations that promise to be good matches.

Resumes that get results

Some quick tips on helping candidates develop their resumes:

- Stress accomplishments. Anyone can pat her- or himself on the back and say, "I am an effective leader" or a "results-oriented executive." But what does that really mean?

Encourage job seekers to point out accomplishments that speak for them and, at the same time, that subtly suggest their talents in capitalizing on opportunities and solving problems. For instance, emphasize such accomplishments as new business generated, money saved, customer complaints reduced, sensitive situations resolved, budgetary responsibilities, and supervisory scope.

- Feature the candidate's "value-added"; that is, the experiences that separate the candidate from others who are competing for the same positions.

■ Select a format that is visually inviting and easy to scan. Most hiring authorities spend 60 to 90 seconds reviewing a resume during the initial screening. Make good use of headings and feature key information by underlining or using bold print. Above all, be sure information is logically organized. Use good paper stock and avoid dark colors.

■ Remember, the purpose of the resume is to whet prospective employers' interest, not to retrace all of the details of the job candidate's career development. Resumes should be kept to one page if possible; they should definitely not be more than two pages long. Photographs are generally inappropriate on a resume.

■ Modify the resume from time to time. Encourage job seekers to experiment with new formats and changes in phrasings and the way they feature their skills and accomplishments. Ideally, each resume submitted should be tailored for the position sought.

Do your homework

Job candidates can research prospective employers by consulting industry directories, using information available through the Chamber of Commerce and other community organizations, talking to people who are employed by organizations that interest them, and reviewing annual reports and other literature available from employers they are considering.

Encourage research that goes beyond gathering basic personnel-related information. For instance, encourage the outplaced employee to learn about an organization's strategic plans, new markets it plans to enter, industry trends, and competition. Such research allows job seekers to be more confident and prepared in approaching employers.

The interview

The job campaign is now well underway. It may involve generating leads, interviewing, writing follow-up letters and making follow-up calls, touring the prospective workplace, taking tests, being evaluated at an assessment center, and making presentations to prospective employers.

Of course, the heart of the job campaign is the interview. The difference between candidates who are successful in getting job offers and those who aren't may not be their job-related skills; it may be their job-finding skills.

As with any product or service, packaging often makes the difference between what is in demand and what isn't. Candidates who gain attractive offers quickly do appear qualified in terms of their ability to do the jobs. But they also project images that suggest that they are confident, team-players, and knowledgeable of the prospective hiring organization and how their skills can contribute to its success.

When helping job candidates prepare for interviews, it's important to remind them that, for the most part, they are not dealing with professional interviewers. Most people who conduct job interviews are not trained to interview and assess job candidates. The average hiring

authority makes fewer than four selection decisions per year and tends to view the interviewing process as an incidental responsibility that goes along with his or her other duties.

Therefore, job seekers need to help prospective employers discover and understand how they can contribute to solving the organization's current and projected problems.

If you have ever watched a debate among top political candidates, you've seen how true professionals can diffuse no-win, sensitive questions and manage to end on a positive note by recapping major accomplishments that present them in a favorable light.

Successful job candidates adopt a similar strategy; they plan to work three or four of their strongest points into interviews rather than leaving their fates in the hands of novice interviewers who may or may not ask the right questions. And, of course, they anticipate and plan answers to problem questions before they are asked.

A job campaign isn't over until an offer has been extended and accepted. Too often people let up on their searches when they feel an attractive offer is about to be made. If, for whatever reason, the offer isn't made, the job candidate is likely to suffer a psychological setback and lose momentum and valuable time. Simply put, persistence is the hallmark of successful job seekers.

Nearly every job campaign has its share of ups and downs. The importance of injecting a good measure of empathy, reassurance, and positive reinforcement cannot be overstated.

When the offers start rolling in

Ideally, the job candidate's efforts will generate more than a single offer. How well the offer is negotiated can, of course, have both short-term and long-term implications on the candidate's career development. Those implications can go far beyond the salary. For instance, a skilled negotiator may be able to

negotiate a title and compensation package that could take several years to attain otherwise.

The job seeker's negotiating power is always greatest during the brief period after an offer is extended and before the offer is formally accepted. Once the job seeker is on the job it's nearly impossible—and almost always unadvisable—to request more than has been agreed upon.

Every negotiation involves three steps:

■ Determine the negotiables.

Encourage the job seeker to look beyond salary and other personnel-related details. For instance, negotiables may include title, performance review dates, time off to pursue other professional interests, allowances for attending conventions and other professional-development activities, and support resources. The negotiables are limited only by the candidate's creativity.

■ Identify the negotiating

range. Help job candidates determine beforehand the most they can possibly justify—given their backgrounds, the organizations they are likely to be negotiating with, and prevailing wage and salary rates—and the least they are willing to accept in a compensation package. Of course, advise candidates to keep this range concealed as the negotiation phase progresses.

If the job candidate gets involved in a complicated negotiation that involves an employment agreement and such details as relocation, profit sharing, and severance pay, encourage consultation with an attorney.

■ Determine a negotiation

strategy. Advise job seekers to begin their negotiations by suggesting a compensation package that is at the top of their negotiation ranges.

The "one trip to the well" adage definitely applies to negotiating a job offer. Why not start by asking for the most that can be reasonably justified? Also, advise candidates to plan ahead about which negotiables they are willing to concede if necessary. Negotiating is a skill that can be learned by reading books, listening to audiotapes, and practicing. Without negotiating skills, candi-

dates risk losing valuable time in attaining their long-term goals.

Before accepting an offer, encourage job seekers to reflect back on the information they learned about themselves when they began their job campaigns. Does the job promise to be a good fit between their work values, interests, skills, life circumstances, and aspirations?

A never-ending process

Many job candidates greet the end of their job campaigns with sighs of relief: the interviewing, anxiety, rejection letters, waiting, and concerns over finances are over—at least for the moment. But keep in mind that career change and career decision making is not a point-in-time activity: it is a process that we undergo throughout our lives.

The job a candidate lands is, of course, vital to his or her long-term career plan. True professionals develop plans that consider questions such as these:

■ How will this job contribute to my short-term and long-term career goals?

■ Is this job a positive step toward my long-term goals, or is it merely a short-term, convenient solution?

■ What new knowledge and skills will I develop in this job that will help me in the future?

Those who develop successful careers are always mindful of such questions—even when they aren't looking for employment.

Appraisal Training: Not Just for Managers

By Robert H. Buckham, an industrial marketing and economic analyst with Hecla Mining Company, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

Mark closed the personnel folder and sat back. He had just completed a quarterly performance-appraisal interview with one of his better employees. Mark felt that something wasn't right. He had applied most of the material from the company's recent performance-appraisal training seminar. But the interview had seemed one-sided. He wasn't sure that Betty had left

fully committed to the goals they had outlined.

This year organizations will spend millions of dollars training supervisors in performance-appraisal and interview skills. Many professional articles will be written on how to improve the performance-appraisal process. But one area is frequently overlooked. Many employees leave the interviews feeling manipulated. Better performance-appraisal results would occur if both managers and employees first received training in basic interview skills.

Several common problems occur during the interview process. Many employees are not assertive enough and are too willing to accept comments without adequate discussion. Many respond emotionally rather than objectively reviewing the facts available. Often, employees do not understand the performance-appraisal process, how the results are used, or why the organization even needs performance appraisals.

Also, employees do not participate actively in problem diagnosis or action planning. The results are misconception, frustration, distrust, and a lack of commitment.

A training program for employees could easily reduce or eliminate such concerns.

A workable training outline

Performance-appraisal training for employees should cover both general knowledge and specific skills. A brief, workable training outline is given below. Each organization should customize a program to fit its own needs and circumstances.

The program should cover three key knowledge areas:

- Employees need to gain an understanding of the mission, goals, and priorities of the organization and team. That will lead to a better understanding of the unique contribution each individual can make and why each is an important member of the organization team.
- Employees should understand how the organization's performance-appraisal system works, how it is used, and how results are related to reward. An honest discussion of

those areas will eliminate a lot of misconceptions. That will make employees feel more at ease, allowing interviews to focus on performance.

■ Employees should gain an understanding of their own roles and the roles of their managers. Each has obligations and responsibilities. It makes managers' jobs easier when employees know what is expected. Interviews can be hard for managers. Knowledgeable, empathetic employees can help managers over the difficult parts.

Training in specific skills should cover at least three basic areas.

First, employees should learn and practice effective communication skills. These include active listening, clarifying, questioning, providing feedback, and responding to constructive criticism. Employees will respond better to appraisal interviews when they know such skills and have had opportunities to practice them. When managers use the same skills, employees will feel less manipulated.

Another key skill is the ability to diagnose problems and their root causes. A problem may be caused by an employee's own performance, a lack of understanding or training, or a constraint imposed by the organization. Rather than responding emotionally to comments, the employee can help the manager look at the facts to find the true root cause of the problem.

Goal-setting and action-planning skills are as important for employees as they are for managers. Employees should learn how to set personal work goals and establish plans that will lead to success, and should practice doing so. Action planning should be a participative effort, not something imposed by a manager. Employees are more committed when they develop or help develop their own action plans.

The appraisal-interview training can easily be accomplished in a one- or two-day seminar. Employees should be given a lot of practice time, even if they do not become totally proficient in each of the key areas. Behavior-modeling tapes provide excellent guides for employees to respond to. They will probably

feel most comfortable practicing with their peers.

Profound results

A modest investment in employee performance-appraisal training can have profound, long-lasting results. Employees and managers will be less frustrated during and after interviews. They will be more committed. They will be more able to focus on key result areas. Personal and organization improvements will be more noticeable and will occur sooner.

Managers who undertake such training in their organizations should know that it can encourage employees to be more demanding.

One manager who let her employees take such a program found afterward that she had to do a much better job as a manager. Her employees came to performance appraisals well prepared. She had to make several changes in the system when employees showed that their performance was limited by her actions. Since then, she has been promoted to a higher position because of her success in motivating employees and improving the organization.

No one likes to feel manipulated. The best way to avoid such feelings is to have all team members playing on a level field with the same tools and knowledge. Successful teams are successful largely because everyone knows what is expected and how results will be evaluated. Successful teams are able to step back, evaluate their mistakes, and correct them—and learn from them. Providing employees with the same skills that managers use can go a long way toward improving organization performance.

"Training 101" is edited by **Catherine M. Petrini**. Send your short articles for consideration to *Training 101*, Training & Development Journal, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.