



Research Report:
Changing the Conversation:
Shifting Attitudes About Career

May 2018

Career Connections

Today's employees expect their employers to provide some level of career support in the workplace. And it's smart for companies to meet that expectation – a focus on career development leads to lower turnover, higher engagement, and a stronger and more positive culture.

In a world where the median employee tenure has dipped for the first time since 2000* and the labor market is strong, it's time for a new approach to career – one that reflects the increased frequency and more organic nature of the career conversations individuals want to have. It's also time for an approach that acknowledges that “going it alone” is not a realistic approach to career development. While career development begins with self-reflection, we rely on others, and need to support them in return, as we explore career growth. We also know that few things in life go according-to-plan so equipping individuals to be career-resilient is important.

Finally, employees are craving more frequent career conversations with their managers. Because they play a pivotal role in matching talent-to-role, leaders need to be ready to engage in more frequent career conversations.

GP Strategies' approach to career is rooted in research, informed by 40 years of experience, and effectively tackles the needs both companies and employees have in regard to career.

*The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) announced that median employee tenure – the length of time a worker has been with his or her current employer – was 4.2 years in January 2016, down from 4.6 years in January 2014. It's the first dip recorded by the biennial survey since 2000.

Our Research

In 2017, we conducted a pulse survey to get a sense for shifting attitudes about career. This pulse survey included several questions about career that we've asked for years, and also included some new questions to gauge how perspectives on career might be changing.

Career and Engagement

The research confirmed – in a really big way – what we already knew. Career support has a tremendous impact not only on retention, but also on engagement. In fact, 83% of respondents indicated that career support has *some impacts* or *greatly impacts* their level of engagement.

So the stakes are high. You want to keep your employees but, more importantly, you want to keep them engaged. Because when they do walk out the door, they are leaving for better opportunities and growth and for more interesting work. Getting ahead of those issues means preventing your most valuable assets from leaving.



Our engagement research, “What Does Good Look Like?”, released in May of this year, further underscores the connection between engagement and career. Quite simply, the more engaged you are the more likely it is that you have career opportunities, the more you have career opportunities, the more likely you are to be engaged.

Career (career development/opportunities to grow and develop) often emerges as a top driver when we ask clients what would improve their satisfaction. It is also likely to come out as a retention factor when we ask professionals why they may consider leaving an organization.

On questions related to professional growth, there is a particularly large gap between organizations with the highest and lowest levels of engagement regarding opportunities for growth (30 pt. gap) and career (31 pt. gap).

Have opportunities to grow and develop in their position



Have career opportunities in their organization



More Frequent Conversations & The Importance of Values

We know people want to talk about their careers. The problem, we soon discovered, is that while people want to talk about their career more frequently, there is a widening gap between the *desire* to talk about career and *reality* of how frequently that happens.

- 78% of those surveyed want to talk about their career quarterly if not more frequently.
- Of those who want to talk about their career frequently, 23% want to talk about it “more often on a casual and quick basis.”
- The reality is that 35% have those conversations annually and 27% not at all.

The gap between the *desired* frequency of career discussions and the *actual* frequency, while not surprising, is a wake up call that the gap is widening in such a way that companies are putting themselves at greater risk for undervaluing – if not losing – their human capital. The wider the gap, the more your retention risks grow.

What we know is that when a manager and an employee do sit down to talk about their careers, the employees aren't interested primarily in promotion or compensation, although both are important. When employees engage in career discussions with their managers, they most want to talk about what's important to them – their strengths and how they can do more work to satisfy them.

When you talk about career, what's most important for your manager to understand?



- 74%** My values and strengths and how I can do more work that satisfies them
- 10%** My level of compensation and how I can increase it
- 4%** When will I get promoted?
- 3%** My previous work experience and roles

This is an important point to underscore in light of the fact that many managers avoid career conversations because they are concerned that those conversations will revolve around when employees will be promoted or get a raise. That's not the primary driver for many employees. What's more, when we asked individuals what criterion they will look for in their next position the top answers were:

- Meaningful work – I want work that satisfies my personal values or contributes to the larger community
- Interesting work – I want work that challenges me, stimulates my intellect, or helps me broaden my knowledge or skills
- Work/Life Balance – I want a job that fits my lifestyle

The key point is that if both individuals and managers engage in broader career development discussions, without focusing narrowly on compensation and level, they are both likely to find the exchange more gratifying.

Finding Satisfaction and Growth With Your Organization

GP Strategies' point of view on career is tied to our X Model of Engagement. We believe that when individuals are at a point of maximum contribution and satisfaction they are fully engaged and having more Great Days At Work. Our research and experience tells us that they don't need to leave your organization to get those things.

“When individuals are at a point of maximum contribution and satisfaction they are fully engaged and having more Great Days At Work.”

As long as you are having conversations with your employees and helping to support their pursuit of new skills and work that satisfies them, they want to stay with you. We found that 85% of individuals agreed, or strongly agreed, that there is nothing wrong with staying in the same job if they can try new things or develop their skills.



The Role Employees Want Managers to Take in Their Careers

So what role do employees want managers to play in their career development? We know they want to have career conversations more frequently; want to focus on what's important to them, their values, and their skills; and that they are okay staying with your organization as long as they can find work that satisfies them and helps them grow and develop. But what are the specific actions a manager can take to demonstrate commitment to an employee's career development?



Our research indicates the best way managers can provide support is by:

- Helping them make connections with others in the industry, in their organization, or with people who share their interests (35%)
- Providing access to industry benchmarks on their role and compensation (25%)
- Helping them with their personal branding (25%)

We believe the role of connector is an important one for the manager. Managers have a unique organizational vantage point. They are in the best position to understand the individual values and needs of their employees through the career and engagement conversations. At the same time, they typically have a view into the organization’s strategy, goals, structural changes, and priorities. They would be some of the first individuals to know if a key position is open or where the company might need certain human capital resources. Their role as “connector” is essentially that of a matchmaker bringing organizational needs and individual career aspirations together.

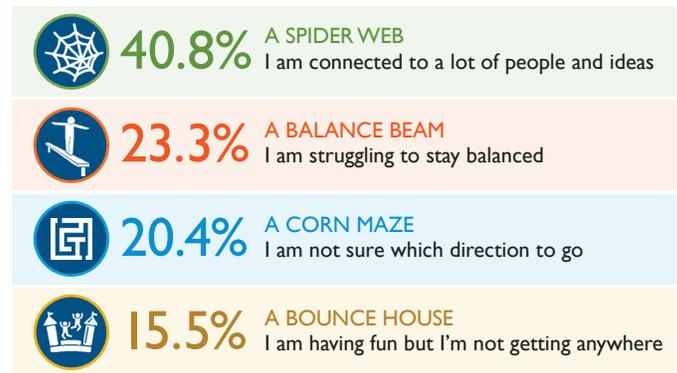
This role is particularly important in light of the fact that networking – the ultimate form of career connection – is a place where individuals struggle. Our research found that the biggest obstacles to networking are:

- Time – 33% said they don’t have the time to do it
- Lack connections – 29% said they don’t know what opportunities exist to expand their network
- Uncertainty – 17% said they don’t know what to say to people

When successful connections happen, it’s not just the individual that benefits. Managers should be generous in helping make those connections – for the benefit of both your employees and the organization. It’s not about being a talent hoarder. It’s about being a talent developer and sharer.

What Does Career Feel Like?

Finally, because an image often conveys what people are feeling more than words can, we asked a metaphorical question. Our survey asked participants what their career feels like. Here’s what we found out:



And while there is a bit-of-humor in the question, the results were both heartening and challenging at the same time. We took solace in the fact that people feel as though they are connected to people and ideas. This is a great opportunity to build on the concept of career connections and community and help individuals grow and expand their career development. At the same time, we saw the challenges in the other individuals who are struggling with balance, direction, and forward movement.

GP Strategies wants to help individuals with their career challenges, whatever they may be. We do it because it means a greater likelihood these individuals will stay and contribute meaningfully to their organizations. And we know that it also means they will experience a higher degree of individual satisfaction when they are doing work that works for them personally. Greater contribution and personal satisfaction means more Great Days At Work – and that’s a connection we can all be proud of! ■



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Source Population: The pulse survey we conducted in 2017 builds on the prior research by including several common questions and we introduced some new questions to gauge where people are today with respect to their thoughts around career development. This year’s pulse survey draws from a population of just over 500 participants – 62% female and 38% male. Our research is informed by results from several generations including Baby Boomers (42%), Generation X (30%), Millennials (25%) and Generation Z (3%). We gathered information across organizational levels including Frontline Employees (48%), Frontline Managers (32%), Manager of Managers (12%), and Executives (8%). Finally, we looked at the tenure of respondents and 39% have been in their current role for 0-3 years, 19% have a 4-6 year tenure, 13% 7-10 years, and 29% have been in their current role for 10+ years.

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