

# Act to adapt

**Sara Hope** and **Emily Cosgrove** examine the changing face of career conversations in the new war for talent

**L**et's face it. If you're a CEO, team leader, or performance manager, the only thing you really have is your employees' commitment and engagement. Understanding the new millennial career path (more like career spaghetti than a career ladder) and being able to skilfully create a meaningful dialogue around it, is critical for retaining a talent-rich organisation.

With the average cost of recruiting a member of staff being more than £30k<sup>1</sup>, the message is clear: engaging our modern 21st century workforce is an urgent issue for us all.

However, many companies today are not setup to attract, let alone retain, talented millennials as they operate under outdated processes that do not reflect the changing attitudes of the new generations and the world they live in.

This article will examine how two organisations, EY and Swarovski, are strengthening their internal conversational skills, particularly around careers, to drive talent engagement in the 21st century. We will hear how their talent creation stems from engaging both the heart and the head, together with their key insights into the changing attitudes of millennials towards career and personal development in the new war for talent.

## **Conversational skill**

Conversational skill, particularly around careers, is an essential ingredient for managing talent in

a 21st century organisation. The Social Age of organisations is upon us. In the new world of work where technology has taken on a pervasive presence, there has never been a stronger imperative for leaders to have greater flexibility to engage in conversations in different ways.

In Sherry Turkle's latest book *Reclaiming Conversation, The Power of Talk in the Digital Age*, she highlights her simple antidote: we need to talk more to each other. She says: "I believe we are wired to talk. It is a Darwinian thing."

The old models of command and control are no longer viable. We've grown up with a narrow view of conversations, thinking they are about talking, sharing information or telling people what to do. Through the fields of neurological and cognitive research, we are learning that a conversation goes "much deeper and is more robust than simple information sharing"<sup>2</sup>.

For those who shape organisations, and particularly those whose remit is linked to talent development, this growing awareness creates huge opportunities yet significant business risks if we fail to adapt.

EY has created and developed a well-thought-through approach to how they manage 21st century career conversations in their talent centre. They are acutely aware that the notion of the term 'career' for their newly-qualified accountants is somewhat different to what it used to be ten, even five, years ago. This has meant a re-think in the approach and skills used by talent advisers when handling career conversations.

The Talent Centre is a confidential 1-1 career coaching service, provided for those who are newly-qualified. A Talent Centre coaching session focuses on the coachee's career motivators and drivers and establishes some tangible next steps to help them accomplish their career goals. Nicola Pye, senior manager Firm-Wide Talent Development, is clear about her purpose behind their offering.

"This kind of opportunity is different to what our young talent might expect from

*Conversational skill is an essential ingredient for managing talent in a 21st century organisation*

their performance manager (counsellor). They are completely confidential and objective. We also wanted to ensure the focused 'career conversations' were developmental and enabled people to walk away with a much deeper level of awareness compared to having a conversation with peers, friends or colleagues."

### Thinking time

One of the greatest qualities of the centre is the unique opportunity it provides participants with; time to think. In a fast-paced environment, being in a space with a trained, skilled, emotionally present, and genuinely interested human being, who is not just going to tell you what to do, is rare.

Pye says: "We started off by making a session 90 minutes, but have increased them to two hours because it enables us to explore the next

steps in more depth." This is clearly valued by users as their biggest source of referrals is word of mouth.

Swarovski have drawn upon their core philosophy as an organisation to help inform their approach to managing 'career conversations' across the talent population. Anna Cocca, Global HR business partner, shares her insights. "Our philosophy at Swarovski is that you own your career and development. By strengthening our ability to have holistic 'career conversations', we are supporting our talent to really think about their broader life and what fulfilment looks like for them. I openly discuss family situations, commitments, hobbies, life joys and explore what enables them to feel engaged; musical instruments, basketball, or other outside activities."

Having clarity on the value of adapting the

### References

- 1 Oxford Economics.
- 2 Glaser, J. *Conversational Intelligence*, Bibliomotion (October 1, 2013)



approach to ‘career conversations’ both from an individual and organisational perspective is important, too. The EY talent centre is not there just to serve the needs of individuals; there is significant value from an organisational learning perspective too. Thematic insights are shared with service line leaders to drive change and help align the needs of both employees and the organisation.

Pye explains: “For example, one of the things that has come up across the board is that people who are tending to come to the talent centre are more likely to be lower in resilience, and we know that from the career profiles. We have been able to feed that back to senior leaders and say ‘is this something you’ve been thinking about and how you are engaging with this population?’”

### Heart and head

Enabling those who engage with the new generation of talent to be skilful conversationalists and competent in having meaningful and relevant conversations has been key in both EY and Swarovski.

It is no longer enough to just explore the notion of a traditional vertical career and assume this would be sufficient to sustain the innate hunger for deeper fulfilment, meaning, and purpose that is so evident in millennials today. Having the confidence to let go of being ‘expert’ in understanding career paths, and maintain curiosity requires confidence and often feels risky.

“I find I enquire a lot more,” says Cocca. “These new skills have built trusting relationships. Appreciating and showing people you are interested in them is key to retaining talent. Demonstrating you are valuing the person and what they are aspiring to helps us become a successful company in the future.”

By working with The Conversation Space, Pye equipped herself and the wider team with the confidence and capability to deliver a leading edge service. “We wanted to make sure we were offering a service that was powerful and different compared with what we had before. The session gave us exactly what we needed in terms of tools and techniques, it also challenged me to think



about some of my expectations of the service we were providing.

“We set the context of the conversation very clearly. The agenda is all about where our clients want the conversation to go. We do exercises to help to them to think about what’s important to them from a personal wellbeing and emotional perspective. The head comes in when we do a career profile and they get a psychometric report which focuses on their strengths.”

### Millennial attitudes

Attracting and retaining talent also means acknowledging and adapting to the ever-changing landscape of career and personal development. Younger employees want to work somewhere interesting, edgier, and in an environment where there is more creativity and collaboration.

### Tips for success

Pye and Cocca are clear about their tips for success when engaging in career conversations with their millennial talent:

- 1 Be really clear on your offering.** It’s really important that you can articulate to your stakeholders what it is you’re offering and what it is they’ll get out of it. Manage expectations and stay relevant.
- 2 Share organisational learning.** Give something back. Having an ear to the ground with your talent population can be enormously beneficial. Respecting boundaries and confidentiality is paramount. However, sharing themes can help inform the wider change agenda.
- 3 Get the right people and upskill them in career conversations.** Be mindful of combining conversational skill with business acumen, and an appreciation and awareness of what your clients may be experiencing.
- 4 Have an open mind.** During your career conversations keep your mind open to possibilities. It’s very easy for us to think in our organisational boundaries and quickly close the door.
- 5 Help employees articulate their career aspiration clearly.** It is unlikely they are only going to be speaking to you. Encourage them to connect with as many people as possible and have a clear, compelling story about what they want and what they bring.
- 6 Share tools.** Working with the right tools and techniques that can help aid the thinking process is vital.

## Employees want more than just to go to the office, sit at the desk and wait for the next promotion

Careers used to be all about job titles, status and the traditional rewards relating to money; but no more. Employees also want more than just to go to the office, sit at the desk and wait for the next promotion. Today’s work environment is about being part of a community, being where the conversation is happening, and connecting in a variety of ways as human beings and through technology.

“Millennials are quite demanding,” says Cocca. “Through our conversations we are helping them take a holistic view. We enable them to be accountable for statements that they make and aspirations they claim to have.”

There is a growing awareness in many organisations about the importance of work-life balance but acknowledgment that this is likely to mean something different to millennials compared to people from older generations. “I’ve started calling it the work-life blend” says Pye. “Many of our employees feel they want to prioritise the things they do in their personal lives equally as much as the things they have to do in work. There is also a big theme about wanting to be part of something bigger and being frustrated if they are being held back.”

Holding impactful and insightful career conversations with the emerging talent of the 21st century requires skill. Being able to navigate and help others to fully engage in carving a successful career takes a willingness to be creative and work with the heart and the head.

Both Pye and Cocca, and their respective talent teams at EY and Swarovski, are passionate about supporting people to be fully themselves; and to recognise their own personal genius and career passion. They are acutely aware that recruiting and retaining their future talent means an exploration of their own assumptions about careers. It has meant working with a spirit of inquiry, building trusting relationships, and having the courage to challenge the traditional notions of career development in two of the world’s leading global brands. **TJ**

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