

# Employer practice in progressing low- paid staff

For:

**UK Commission for Employment and Skills**

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**August 2012**

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# 1 Executive summary

There is a strong link between unemployment and lack of progression opportunities. Around half of all new claims for Jobseeker's Allowance are from people who had made another claim less than six months previously<sup>1</sup>. This suggests there is a degree of 'churn' in the labour market. If employees are not able to progress with their current employer or another employer, they are at risk of becoming trapped in a low-pay no-pay cycle. Those already out of work are disadvantaged as progression up the job ladder is necessary to free up lower and entry level jobs for people looking to get into the labour market.

To tackle issues around progression it is necessary to understand employer practice in this area. The low-pay no-pay cycle is problematic and there are many trapped in it – but some employers do break the cycle by progressing employees from low-skill and/or low pay jobs. This, however, is a neglected topic<sup>2</sup>; so the aim of this research is to develop an understanding of how the progression of low-skill and low pay employees works, through a series of case studies with employers who progress their staff.

Employers likely to progress their low-skill and/or low pay employees were identified using the 2011 Employer Skills Survey. Around 30 of these employers were then asked to participate in qualitative interviews about their organisations and their progression practices.

For these employers, 'progression' is broadly perceived as the development of low-skilled employees to enable them to either develop in an existing role by gaining greater expertise and competence through experience and education, or to combine this with moves through different job roles.

Employer commitment to progression tends to be linked to business need and the availability of opportunities; but it is not entirely defined by them. Opportunities for progression can also come about through horizontal placements or transfers, where the employee gains experience across similar or higher-skilled roles in the organisation but remains at their current grade or level.

The research indicates that horizontal transfers are often considered a necessary ingredient for the acquisition and development of skills. The ability to succeed in such placements is viewed as a positive sign of the learning capacity and productivity of low-skilled employees. Successful development in an existing role or through horizontal transfers can then result in opportunities for vertical progression and accompanying pay increases.

## Why do employers progress their staff?

There is a strong sense amongst this report's case study organisations that progression for low-skilled employees represents good business practice, and has a consequent positive effect on business performance in a variety of ways.

Some employers choose to progress as a response to recruitment difficulties, and those that do so highlight improved retention rates and reduced turnover as a result. Employers who progress also gained greater flexibility, as their employees develop a broader understanding of the organisation and could, for example, cover for holidays, sickness and other absences.

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<sup>1</sup> ONS Joint Unemployment and Vacancies Operating Systems Cohort

<sup>2</sup> Keep, E & James, S (2010) Recruitment and Selection – the Great Neglected Topic SKOPE Research Paper No. 88 Available: <http://www.labwales.org.uk/socsi/research/researchcentres/skope/publications/researchpapers/SKOPEWP88.pdf>

Employers observe an improvement in productivity as a result of their commitment to employee progression. Some also draw an explicit link between their progression rationale and their reputation as an organisation and employer.

Whilst recruitment and retention issues foster the development of progression practices for some employers, others describe a longer-term culture of progression – often referring to it making good business sense to ‘grow your own’. A number of organisations interviewed were family run businesses. For them, progression seems to arise from a paternalistic perspective in which employees are described as members of the organisations’ extended family.

All of the employers confirm they would recruit unemployed people if the appropriate attitude, behaviours and sense of commitment were displayed.

### **How do employers progress their staff?**

There are various approaches to progression adopted by employers. The key role played by committed leadership and management is a common finding throughout this research. Furthermore, the championing of progression is often undertaken and supported at all levels of the organisation.

The majority of organisations operate inclusive (i.e. open to all staff) and planned approaches to progression; although the quality of in-work performance by a low-skilled employee is a key factor in the decision to encourage and/or support them through the available routes.

As such, staff appraisal systems and processes are used both to focus on development and progression opportunities, and to assess quality of work performance and commitment. Where such systems are used, appraisal also includes both formal and informal career advice, with certain examples provided of tailored development opportunities to suit an employee’s career interests. In addition, mentoring and coaching is an important feature of many employers’ approaches to progression.

Employers have defined and developed progression pathways, with some displaying a mix of structured, formal pathways operating alongside less structured, more informal routes. All of the case study organisations progress staff vertically but only two cases of automatic progression were found (based on a certain level of performance) and two further cases where pay and incentives are used as part of progression practice.

### **Enablers of progression**

The research indicates that where the following factors or attitudes are in place, progression is more likely to take place or easier to make happen:

#### **1. A clear commitment is made by senior managers to encourage and enable progression and a “culture” of progression**

When management commitment has become embedded within the organisation, progression becomes part of the organisational culture or ethos and employers start viewing their low-skilled employees as a talent pool to be developed.

#### **2. There is a systematic approach to human resource development and allocation**

HR processes such as recruitment, induction and appraisals, and methods such as high performance working practices are key, and are aligned to general development and progression opportunities.

#### **3. Appropriate internal resource is dedicated to training and other forms of development**

The provision of training – both accredited and informal – is a pre-requisite for staff development and progression. Other forms of development include: apprenticeships, secondments, mentoring, e-learning, job shares, acting up in supervisory roles, team working and project working.

#### **4. Employees understand progression and are motivated to perform well**

Progression is enabled when low-skilled employees understand where they can identify progression pathways and how they can access the opportunities to pursue them. Motivation to progress and good performance are also crucial.

#### **5. Peer support mechanisms are in place**

Peer support operates as a complement to management support. In organisations where there is a strong commitment to progression, staff are encouraged to offer informal and formal guidance and support to those following them through progression pathways.

#### **6. There is organisational growth and a long-term perspective, and staff turnover is sustainable**

Growth is an important enabler as it creates opportunities for individuals to progress into. Employers that take a long-term view anticipate future skill needs and this tends to reinforce the need for progression. Interestingly, some employers noted that very low turnover of staff can be an impediment to progression as opportunities to move upwards are consequently rare.

#### **7. Organisational scale**

The size of the organisation leads to opportunities for progression in different ways. Large organisations have bigger HR departments, a greater breadth of roles and a steady rate of turnover. Small businesses are more willing to be flexible by creating new roles.

# 2 Introduction

## 2.1 Context

The UK Commission and government departments are interested in how and why employers progress their low-skilled staff. With the objective of helping people to get into, and on, in work, Commissioners and colleagues are seeking to identify ways in which businesses can help people progress out of the low-pay no-pay cycle.

There are regions and sections of the UK population that face significant barriers to sustained employment. One such barrier is the low-pay no-pay cycle. Significant evidence exists to show that the experience of low pay or unemployment increases the chance of being trapped in those states. However, as well as the low paid being more likely to move into unemployment or inactivity, those entering employment following a period outside of work are more likely to be low paid. Those who have been low paid prior to the spell of unemployment or inactivity are even more likely than other entrants to be low paid again when they subsequently move back into work. It is this pattern that the concept of the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' describes<sup>3</sup>.

Research<sup>4</sup> also suggests that most of those working in low paid work view 'lower-level jobs' as fragmented and disconnected rather than related steps on a progression path. Workers can remain trapped in, or perceive themselves as trapped in, 'dead-end jobs' or get caught in the low-pay no-pay cycle which harms their ability to realise the financial, social and psychological benefits associated with work.

If workers are not able to progress – either with their current employer or another employer – then there is a risk that they will become trapped. Furthermore, progression up the job ladder is necessary to free up lower and entry-level jobs for those seeking access into the labour market. But while the low-pay no-pay cycle is clearly an issue for the UK labour market there are many employers that do offer progression opportunities for their lower skilled staff. This research explores the reasons why employers support the progression of low-skilled, low paid workers and the processes they use.

## 2.2 Aims and objectives

There is much to be learnt about which employers develop a progression approach to the management of their organisations and the reasons why they do so. The objective of this research was to gain a greater understanding of how and why employers facilitate career progression amongst their low-skilled employees.

The research examined employer motivation, practices and key enabling factors associated with providing progression opportunities; as well as exploring how employers select individuals to progress.

## 2.3 Framework to explore progression

The concept of progression is open to multiple definitions and interpretations. In this study we drew on the concept of a 'career' to explore progression in a variety of organisational contexts. One view of a career sees the concept in terms of an early occupational or sectoral attachment

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3 See e.g. Stewart, M.B. & Swaffield, J.K. (1999) 'Low Pay Dynamics and Transition Probabilities' in *Economica* 66:261 pp.23-42; Cappellari, L. & Jenkins, S.P. (2008) 'Transitions Between Unemployment and Low Pay' in *Volume Research in Labour Economics* 28 pp.57-79; Lloyd, C., Mason, G. & Mayhew, K. (2008) *Low-Wage Work in the United Kingdom* New York: Russell Sage  
4 Nunn, A., Johnson, S., Monro, S., Bickerstaffe, T. and Kelsey, S. (2007) *Factors Influencing Social Mobility: DWP Research Report 450*. Corporate Document Services, Leeds; Froy, F. and Giguere, S. (2010) *Putting in Place Jobs that Last. A Guide to Rebuilding Quality Employment at Local Level*. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris. Available: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/12/6/44418145.pdf>

followed by a succession of related jobs arranged in a hierarchy through which people move in a predictable sequence. There are clearly attractions to this concept as it provides stability, a context where merit can be recognised and hard work and loyalty can be rewarded. This 'bounded career'<sup>5</sup> is seen as taking place within the confines of a given organisation, and career success is evidenced by increasing status, responsibility and monetary rewards.

But for many, progression in the labour market can also be achieved by moving between employers at varying points in their working life. These have been described as 'serial careers'<sup>6</sup> and are characterised by greater job mobility, which may be horizontal, sideways or downwards in nature and involve various or multiple working contexts (e.g. self-employment, work in small organisations). However, much of the policy discourse continues to view career success in terms of vertical progression; even though for those in low-skilled occupations it can be challenging to find progression routes either within organisations or between them. There are a number of high profile exceptions, such as the NHS, where large organisations afford individuals considerable opportunity to develop their skills and aspirations and ultimately to progress upwards.

However, research suggests that the opportunity to progress is limited for many<sup>7</sup> and that progression is even more challenging for the 4 million people who are self-employed and the further 4 million who work in small organisations (defined as those who employ less than ten people<sup>8</sup>).

It is also important to recognise that the idea of progression as an incremental increase in salary, status and security might not be recognised by everyone in the labour market. Individuals may seek to progress within their own terms which may not always match up with those of employers or policy makers. Consequently, it may be possible to identify a wider range of outcomes as being progression.

This perspective may include the 'lifestyle career' which places the notion of a career in a broader work-life context, where quality of life considerations are as valued as those associated with traditional career advancement and may influence the practices employers adopt to support progression.

### 2.3.1 *Employers and progression*

The Human Resource Development (HRD) or talent management policies and practices of employers have a major impact on the nature and extent of progression throughout organisations. How employers select, recruit, retain and develop their employees has a fundamental impact on the opportunities for progression in the workplace.

However, research evidence suggests that employers (and those working in low- skilled and/or entry level jobs<sup>9</sup>) tend not to view low-skilled roles as a foundation for progression. Employers tend to focus on key talent groups such as graduates or managers.

Research in this arena is limited, however the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development<sup>10</sup> suggests that less than half of employers have a strategy to support the development of low-skilled workers and less than a third offer career support to employee groups (such as part-time workers). Green makes the point that this approach may be wasting talent and that most workers at all levels can develop their skills and progress if they have the opportunity<sup>11</sup>.

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5 Arthur, M & Rousseau, D. (eds.) (1996) *The Boundaryless Career: A New Employment Principle for a New Organisational Era* Oxford: Oxford University Press

6 Hopson, B (2009) *From Vocational Guidance to Portfolio Careers: A Critical Reflection*. Derby: International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby.

7 Lloyd, C. and Mayhew, K. (2010) 'Skill: The Solution to Low Wage Work?' in *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 5, pp. 429-445.

8 BIS (2011) *Business Populations Estimates for the UK and Regions 2011* Available: <http://www.fsb.org.uk/pressroom/assets/statistical%20release%20bpe%202011%20edition.pdf>

9 For the purposes of this study defined as elementary, process and sales occupations.

10 CIPD (2003) *Managing Employee Careers. Issues, Trends and Prospects*. Survey Report, June. Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, London.

11 See Green, F (2009) *Job Quality in Britain* Praxis No.1 Available: <http://ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/praxis-1-job-quality-in-britain.pdf>



Data collection and analysis in this project has used the concept of 'High Performance Working Practices'<sup>12</sup> (HPW). HPW practices aim to stimulate more effective employee involvement and commitment, and include activities in the areas of leadership and management, work organisation, human resource development and employment relations. HPW encompasses the bringing together and implementation of these practices in a holistic way to effectively manage an organisation. This environment seeks to enhance the discretionary effort workers put into their work and provides them with an opportunity to fully utilise and further develop the skills that they possess. The practices associated with HPW therefore provide a useful framework to explore activity associated with employer progression practices. The HPW activities of particular interest for our research relate to:

#### Leadership and management

- Inclusive/exclusive approaches to progression (e.g. open recruitment and workforce development for all members of staff or targeted approaches)
- Planned/reactive approaches (e.g. formal strategies or emergent on a contingent basis as skills/employment gaps emerge)
- Mentors to support personal development

#### Work organisation

- Job rotation or job placements to provide the opportunity to develop/apply different skills
- Opportunity to supervise for entry level/low-skilled workers to take on more responsibility
- Team working e.g. a secondment or project work to provide an opportunity to gain wider experience

#### Human resource development

- Defined/developed progression pathways
- Pay and incentives
- Training and development opportunities (e.g. accredited and non-accredited courses)
- Career advice (formal or informal)
- Appraisal, personal development planning and development activity
- Pre-employment (e.g. programmes involving employability and essential skills training)
- Appraisal, personal development planning, and development activity

#### Employment relations

- Worker representation

Different concepts of career progression present challenges in terms of identifying and measuring progression in the labour market. It is possible to view progression in terms of increases in wages and salaries (or remuneration packages more generally). Other perspectives on what constitutes career success might suggest that it is equally important to measure job satisfaction or quality of life. Still other perspectives might suggest alternative indices which may prove difficult to observe or measure, such as the ability of individuals to construct their own narrative of where they have been and where they are seeking to go in their career, or the extent to which their job facilitates their desired work/life balance.

'Progression' and 'career' are clearly complex concepts that resist simple summary in terms of statistics about job tenure, average hours of training undertaken and promotion prospects. Consequently, this research has utilised an inclusive definition of progression and explored these issues through a qualitative case study approach which embraces a variety of different perspectives on progression and career.

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<sup>12</sup> Giles, L et al. (2010) High Performance Working: A Policy Review Evidence Report 18 Available: <http://www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/evidence-report-18-high-performance-working-policy-review.pdf>.; Tamkin, P et al. (2010) High Performance Working: Case Studies Analytical Report Evidence Report 21 Available: <http://www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/evidence-report-21-high-performance-working-case-studies-analytical-report.pdf>

## 2.4 Methodology

The focus of the research was businesses that currently demonstrate that they provide progression opportunities for their low-skilled staff. The majority of employers interviewed were identified through the UK Commission's Employer Skills Survey and their responses to this survey that indicated they provide these opportunities.

28 employers operating across a range of industry sectors were interviewed over a five week period during April and May 2012. The research involved telephone semi-structured interviews with a senior employee within the organisation, for example Human Resource (HR) managers, other HR staff, or other senior managers. The interviews lasted up to 45 minutes and explored issues relating to the organisation's approach to career progression for their low-skilled employees. The findings from these interviews formed individual employers' case studies from which the data included in this overview report was taken.

The research team were:

- From Policy Research Institute - Tim Bickerstaffe, David Devins, Fiona Walton and Sarah Kelsey
- From the International Centre for Guidance Studies - Moira Sutton, Tristram Hooley, Jo Hutchinson

The research team interviewed three small organisations (up to 50 employees); four medium-sized organisations (between 50 and 250 employees); and 21 large organisations (over 250 employees). The organisations interviewed were:

Organisation	Size	Sector	What they do
Dickinson Rabbitte	Small	Legal Services	A small firm of Law Cost Draftsmen.
Shephard Media	Small	Hospitality/Publishing	Established in 1981, the company provides business intelligence services for the aerospace and defence sector across the world.
Acorn Court Care Home	Medium	Health and Social Care	Acorn Court is one of twelve care homes in the Carebase group, employing 150 staff and specialising in dementia, acquired brain injury palliative and end of life care.
Eastgate Primary School	Medium	Education	Eastgate Primary employs 60 staff and has 273 children attending.
Celotex	Medium	Manufacturing	Celotex manufactures and distributes polyisocyanurate insulation boards to deliver high thermal performance and energy efficiency in domestic and commercial building construction.
JMR Vehicle Solutions	Medium	Transport	JMR offer fleet repair and maintenance contracts for trucks and trailers, vehicle servicing, parts, used vehicle sales, and roadside recovery.
AMEC Oil and Gas, Europe and West Africa	Large	Mining	AMEC is a supplier of consultancy, engineering, project management services and asset support services to customers in the oil and gas extraction industry across the world.
Asda	Large	Retail	Asda Stores Ltd was founded in 1949. Following a major expansion in 1989 - buying Gateway Superstores - the company invested heavily in the 1990s to replicate the trading operations of Walmart, becoming a subsidiary in 1999.
Bernard Matthews Farms	Large	Manufacturing	Bernard Matthews are a food manufacturer, producing turkey-based food products for the retail and catering industries.
Bupa Care Homes	Large	Health and Social Care	Bupa Care Homes have over 300 homes in the UK providing residential, nursing, dementia and respite care to the elderly, people with physical disabilities

			and those with specialist medical needs.
Burnley Borough Council	Large	Local Authority	Burnley Borough Council is one of the largest local employers in the area, responsible for providing a wide range of services for the people who live and work in Burnley.
Centrax Turbine Components	Large	Manufacturing	Centrax Turbine Components is a division of Centrax Limited manufacturing machined components and assemblies for gas turbine engine manufacturing companies worldwide.
Enterprise Rent-a-Car	Large	Transport	Enterprise Rent-a-Car is a multinational hire car company. In the UK there is a Head Office for Europe and an Enterprise Business Support Function based in Aldershot.
G4S Northern Ireland	Large	Security	G4S is the world's leading international security solutions group. G4S Northern Ireland provides manned security for the retail and commercial sectors, alarm systems and CCTV.
ITV in Yorkshire	Large	Media	ITV in Yorkshire is the British television service provided by ITV Broadcasting Limited for the Yorkshire franchise area of the ITV network.
Marriott Hotels	Large	Hotels and Restaurants	Marriott Hotels has 63 hotels in the UK and employ approximately 15,000 individuals based in hotels, regional offices or in the field.
Merseyrail Electric	Large	Transport	Merseyrail operate the urban network of trains on the Wirral and Northern Lines in Merseyside. The company has about 1,200 staff and operates 66 stations. The concession is operated by Merseyrail Electrics (2002) Ltd.
WM Morrison	Large	Retail	Morrisons currently has 375 stores across the UK and is planning further expansion, firstly into smaller supermarkets and secondly into home delivery.
R&R Ice Cream	Large	Manufacturing	R&R is one of the largest manufacturers and distributors of ice cream in Europe. In the UK, the company employs about 800 people.
Skipton Building Society	Large	Financial Intermediation	Skipton Building Society is a mutual organisation offering mortgages, savings and investments, insurance, and financial and life planning advice. The nationwide branch network of 303 branches employs approximately 550 people.
University of Derby, Building and Cleaning Services Team	Large	Education	The University of Derby building and cleaning services team employs about 133 staff with a team of 100 cleaners and a smaller team of maintenance assistants, grounds men, and caretakers.
University of Durham	Large	Education	The majority of the University of Durham's low-skilled staff work in the Estates and Buildings department and include: porters, cleaning staff and maintenance staff.
Warburtons	Large	Manufacturing	Still a family-run business, Warburtons employs about 5,000 people in 12 bakeries and 13 depots across the UK

We also spoke to four organisations that preferred not to be identified.

# 3 Rationale for progression

## 3.1 What 'progression' means to the case study organisations

As part of the research, each of the employers was asked to explain what the term 'progression' meant within their organisation – in particular, whether progression is always associated with an increase in earnings, or whether there are different ways that low-skilled employees can progress.

Also asked was whether progression also includes:

- Moving from temporary to permanent employment;
- Taking on more responsibility/seniority;
- Taking on a broader range of roles and responsibilities;
- Taking on supervisory/management responsibility for other staff and/or
- Gaining experience of different job roles.

A range of practices and examples of each of these processes was evident. The employers encourage and support their low-skilled employees to experience a variety of additional responsibilities prior to their progression into a more senior role. Participating employers generally conceived of progression both in terms of an increase in earnings and also in terms of different forms of staff development which may not involve an immediate pay increase. These activities were seen as progression as they enabled low-skilled employees to gain relevant skills and experiences of different organisational roles that raise the likelihood of future formal progression.

Several organisations encourage lower-skilled staff to 'act up' to the role or grade directly above them as cover for colleague absence or as part of a trial to discern their suitability for the role. R&R Ice Cream, for example, encourages acting up in roles to cover sickness or holidays. This forms part of the company's wider progression strategy that supports staff to gain the appropriate technical knowledge but also the operational knowledge of how its different manufacturing lines work on a day-to-day basis.

Other employers were keen for employees to take on a broader range of responsibilities whereby they can increase and deepen their skills. At G4S Northern Ireland, for example, security guards may transfer from a commercial site where they experienced limited personal interaction with clients to a tourist site where this is central to the role. Gaining this diversity of experience means employees are better placed to progress within the organisation when vacancies arise. Another example of different placements to broaden employee skills was found in the Vehicle Servicing department at Enterprise Rent-a-Car, where employees begin in Administration and then move on to get experience in Sales and then in Logistics. This means that they have variety as they progress and they become familiar in all aspects of vehicle servicing.

A similar approach was also found in a food manufacturing company, where low-skilled employees are also encouraged to gain experience by working in different departments. Some employers sought to formalise these kinds of internal work placements or transfers and to put some kind of structure around the learning. At Merseyrail Electrics, a central part of the progression strategy of the train operating company actually includes an established internal work placement programme whereby employees can spend up to a month experiencing a higher-skilled role.

From these examples and others further detailed in section 4, we can conclude that for these employers 'progression' is broadly perceived as the development of their (low-skilled) employees, where opportunities are available for them to either develop in an existing role by gaining greater expertise and competence through experience or education, or to combine this with moves through different job roles. These latter opportunities often come about through horizontal placements or transfers, where the employee gains experience across similar or higher-skilled roles in the organisation but remains at their current grade or level.

For the employers interviewed who use this practice, horizontal transfers are considered as necessary ingredients for the acquisition of multi-task skills and are viewed as positive signals on the learning capacity and productivity of individual (low- skilled) employees. Successful development in an existing role or through horizontal transfer can then result in opportunities for vertical progression, where the employee progresses up into a higher-skilled role and receives an accompanying permanent pay increase.

### **3.2 Rationale for progressing low-skilled employees**

A key aim for this research was to understand the rationale for progressing low- skilled staff. In particular, the research explored whether their decision to progress low-skilled employees arose out of some identified organisational need or formed part of organisation processes or policy that had been established over a longer-term – perhaps to a point where they were now regarded as part of the organisation’s internal culture. The rationale for progression of low-skilled employees seemed to be complex and highly contingent upon the circumstances facing the organisation.

#### *3.2.1 Recruitment*

Several organisations reported the progression of their low-skilled staff arose as a direct response to recruitment difficulties. Before they introduced progression pathways for their low-skilled volunteer Teaching Assistants, Eastgate Primary School found they experienced difficulties in recruiting qualified Teaching Assistants to the available paid roles in the school’s various classes. Faced with this problem, the school decided to train its low-skilled volunteer Teaching Assistants up to NVQ Level 2 in Childhood Studies so that they could apply for the qualified paid Teaching Assistant positions. In common with a number of other employers we spoke to, the opening up of progression pathways was instigated by the need to find the right people for current vacancies and future opportunities.

Dickinson Rabbitte, providers of specialist services to solicitors, reported that they have found it difficult to recruit job-ready Costs Draftsmen who could immediately carry out the tasks of the role to meet the requirements of the firm in terms of the format and quality of the outputs expected. The company found that through training individuals who had joined the firm in entry level positions as administrators they were able to secure the candidates they were looking for and could have direct influence over how staff were trained and developed to prepare bills and schedules in the house style.

#### *3.2.2 Retention*

Progression can not only help an organisation save money on recruitment, but it can also ensure that key skills are retained. Improved retention rates related to progression practices were cited by the majority of employers. For example, prior to R&R Ice Cream introducing formal progression opportunities, the company experienced a high attrition rate. Not only did they encounter regular difficulties with recruitment but also saw valuable knowledge and skills constantly ‘going out the door’ as a result of high staff turnover. This was the key driver for the re-design of the company’s progression policy and processes relating to their low-skilled staff.

JMR Vehicle Solutions specifically targets progression to meet job role and business need but as a company with a strong family-owned business culture, JMR believes that filling internal vacancies through progression of existing staff ensures the employee is a ‘known quantity’ and managers can be more confident in their abilities. The company also believes that progression contributes to the vital organisational culture of loyalty, which helps to reduce staff turnover in an industry where this is generally very high.

#### *3.2.3 Flexibility*

A flexible and responsive workforce was cited as an important factor in the rationale for progression among many of the employers – particularly those whose progression strategy include

employees acting up in higher-skilled or supervisory roles, the offer of internal work placements, or secondments. The ability for employees to gain a greater knowledge and understanding of different roles within the organisation was reported as being not only important for their chances of progression but also useful for the organisation in providing cover for holidays, sickness and other absences.

In this way, the case study organisations reported gaining greater flexibility through the workings of the various progression pathways, as well as from the outcome of having staff progress with a developed understanding of important aspects of the organisation or business. It is common in Asda for employees to move between sections horizontally ensuring their interest and commitment is maintained as well as building their product knowledge.

This enables flexibility in the workplace and as people progress into management positions also ensures they have experience of most trading functions of the store.

#### *3.2.4 Productivity*

Delivering the highest standards of customer service is a key business driver for many organisations. For example, at the core of the approach adopted by McDonalds is the belief that employees who are committed to the organisation possess the required skills and have the self-belief to deliver service confidently, will deliver greater improved performance in terms of customer service, sales and profitability.

Other employers, such as Marriott Hotels, Warburtons, JMR Vehicle Solutions, Merseyrail Electrics and Enterprise Rent-a-Car, reported an observed (although not currently formally evaluated) improvement in productivity made an important contribution to their overall rationale for progression.

At Bernard Mathews, staff can progress from the low-skilled process line roles to any position within the company. This, the company believes, is not only highly motivating for those employees who aspire to progress but also contributes significantly to staff retention and productivity. Bernard Matthews prioritises progression for all its low-skilled staff and roles within the company are nearly always filled through internal progression.

#### *3.2.5 Reputation*

Some employers drew an explicit link between their progression rationale and their reputation as an organisation and employer. G4S Northern Ireland described a culture of progression at the company which is based on the belief that the retention and development of staff helps the company to maintain their position as leaders in their sector. G4S Northern Ireland fills about two-thirds of all their vacancies through internal routes.

#### *3.2.6 Culture*

For several organisations, a progression strategy had developed out of an immediate need, but had since become embedded as part of the organisation's culture.

The University of Durham, R&R Ice Cream and Eastgate Primary School were notable among these. At the University of Durham a former initiative to help female clerical staff progress has become embedded across the university's academic support areas. For both R&R Ice Cream and Eastgate Primary School, progression for low-skilled employees was introduced due to recruitment and retention issues but now forms an established part of their HR strategy.

Other case study employers described a longer-term culture of progression within their organisation, describing a progression of low-skilled staff that was already established when they joined the organisation. Indeed, several of these companies told us that progression of low-skilled employees had been part of their organisational human resource policy for so long it was now 'part

of the culture'. Those describing a culture of progression often referred to it making good business sense to 'grow your own'.

Enterprise Rent-a-Car, also reported a long-standing culture of progression within their Business Support Function in which nearly every employee joins the organisation in a trainee role, regardless of qualifications or previous experience. Enterprise's HR staff also begin working for the company's Business Support Function at a grassroots level.

A number of the organisations interviewed were family owned and run businesses. In these businesses progression of low-skilled employees seemed to arise from a paternalistic perspective in which employees were described as members of the organisations' extended family. This was most noticeable with Bernard Mathews, Morrisons and JMR Motors. At the University of Derby progression had been strongly driven by a manager who displayed similar paternalistic values.

# 4 Progression strategies and practices

This chapter describes the activities and strategies that employers undertake to progress their staff. It considers the importance of committed organisational leadership and management in creating and/or maintaining progression strategies, and reveals the approaches to progression in place at, or adopted by, the case study employers. The chapter also examines how work is organised to provide employees with supported experience of different organisational areas and higher-skilled roles. The key roles played by training, learning and staff appraisal to progression are also considered as part of human resource development policies and practices.

## 4.1 Leadership and management

Although research has shown that employers tend to focus on key talent employee groups, such as graduates and managers, the employers interviewed had all been involved in developing opportunities for low-skilled staff to progress – either through developing or re-designing existing progression strategies and processes to meet changing needs or through instigating new progression routes to address specific recruitment, retention and other issues.

The role played by committed leaders and managers to progression was a common finding from all the case study organisations. Furthermore, the championing of progression is often undertaken and supported at all levels of the organisation. For example, McDonalds' approach to learning and progression is championed by the top management and encouraged by all those in supervisory positions. The organisation has a long-established tradition of supporting learning and development and this has developed over time to include a suite of customised accredited qualifications.

At McDonalds, progression is strongly connected to the organisations' employee engagement strategy with the approach being founded on three core concepts which have been developed through consultation with employees. These core concepts are (i) a global community of 'family' and friends which provides support both in and out of work (ii) working flexibility placed in the hands of the employee/local team (iii) individual expectations that the business will make them more employable. These concepts have informed the development of a range of processes and practices to support progression such as 'Our Lounge', an e-portal providing access to a range of practical guidance to support the transition into work for new recruits and the identification of opportunities for progression for existing employees.

At R&R Ice Cream, the drive for progression was led by the HR Manager and from his efforts an internal qualification was developed to underpin the employee development processes and practices put in place.

- *Inclusive and targeted approaches to progression*

The majority of employers interviewed operate 'inclusive' approaches to progression where all staff can request to progress and be provided with access to appropriate training, learning, secondments, job-shadowing, or mentoring to support movement along the various progression routes available. Access to these routes is, however, dependent upon the employer considering the employee to have the potential for progression.

However, other employers operate more 'targeted' approaches to progression. At JMR Vehicle Solutions progression is specifically targeted at employees considered able to meet the needs of vacant job roles. An employee can express an interest in progression during their Personal Development Review but it is when an employee is considered appropriate for progression, and when an opportunity at a higher level arises, that progression is supported.



In the case of a small family business providing specialist joinery services to the construction industry, no formal strategy for progression exists. Instead, the head of the company identifies an employee whose work is considered good and who works hard and shows general potential. He will then invest the time and resource in progressing this individual. At this small firm, the process of progression is entirely on-the-job and 'hands on'.

This reflects a general finding from the research that the quality of in-work performance by a low-skilled employee is a key factor in the decision of an employer to encourage and/or support progression. There were many examples of employers encouraging low-skilled employees to gain temporary experience of higher-skilled or supervisory roles within the organisation in order to assess their potential for progressing into these roles.

- *Planned and reactive approaches to progression*

In most cases the employers had planned approaches to progression. In those organisations with a long-term progression culture, these approaches were embedded and formed part of the general working environment. Morrisons, McDonalds, and Enterprise Rent-a-Car were among these.

For some others, progression approaches could be adapted slightly to suit a particular business need or a particular employee. For example, at Celotex there is no formal strategy for progression but the company has a specially designed 'skills matrix', which Team Leaders use to indicate that employees have obtained competences in each area of their work. Individual employees are often identified for progression by their progress through the skills matrix or by recommendation by the Operations Manager or Team Leader.

- *Vertical progression*

All the case study employers progress low-skilled staff vertically in their respective organisations, with progression to the next staff level or grade usually only occurring when a suitable vacancy arises. There were two cases where automatic progression occurs. Enterprise Rent-a-Car and Skipton Building Society both automatically progress low-skilled staff to identified higher-skilled roles.

All employees at Enterprise begin as Customer Service Trainees and via a very clearly defined pathway can progress automatically up three further levels to Customer Service Specialist. To make each successful progression step, employees need to meet or surpass certain key performance statistics (e.g. the ratio of calls from enquiries to actual bookings and average caller waiting times). This automatic progression also includes a pay increase. Once an employee has achieved the role of Customer Service Specialist, they are eligible for various Co-ordinator positions across the company. But progression is no longer automatic. When Co-ordinator positions arise, staff must apply for these roles in competition with other internal candidates.

At Skipton Building Society, Customer Advisors can progress automatically to Customer Review Advisor after 12 months. To progress to this role, Customer Advisors need to demonstrate certain behaviours, competencies and knowledge of financial products through observation and role play.

- *Horizontal progression*

Most of the case study organisations employ part-time staff and those that do allow for and facilitate non-linear, horizontal progression to full-time roles. Some employers, such as Merseyrail Electrics, provide opportunities for part-time staff to progress into higher level roles without the need to move to full-time working. The company also enables progressed staff to jobshare.

At Morrisons there are part-time supervisory roles that low-skilled employees can progress into. Bernard Matthew Farms, however, reported that it is more difficult for part-time workers to demonstrate the required commitment and attributes for progression that their full-time counterparts, and this can be a barrier to progression – especially when it is not possible for the role being progressed into to be occupied part-time.

At Celotex a significant number of the entry level positions (such as forklift driver, warehouse operative, and production line operative) are initially filled by temporary agency staff who are then taken on and employed directly.

As mentioned, it is important to recognise that for employers, horizontal progression does not always involve an immediate change in the employee's position, level or grade. Work placements, acting up, secondments or joining project teams all allow the employee to gain experience across similar or higher-skilled roles in the organisation that mean they are likely to have gained the require competences and skills needed to secure permanent higher skilled roles as they become available.

## 4.2 Work organisation

This section describes the different changes to work patterns that employers undertake to help their staff progress.

- *Work placements and transfers*

A high number of the employers stressed the importance of low-skilled workers gaining a fuller appreciation and understanding of the business to support their progression. To this end, several employers include internal work placements as a formal part of their progression strategy. For example, at Morrisons, Asda and Enterprise Rent-a-Car, individual progression pathways for low-skilled employees include transfer to a different department to gain greater experience and to develop new competences.

Low-skilled Production Operatives at R&R Ice Cream who express an interest in progression are given the opportunity to work in different associated roles. Merseyrail Electrics encourages horizontal moves so that staff can gain a better understanding of the company. At Marriott Hotels opportunities are provided for staff to work in different role at a different Marriott site in order to gain appropriate experience. Staff mobility is an advantage in this case because of the necessity of travelling to different sites.

- *Supervisory experience*

Centrax Turbine Components, Acorn Court Care Home and Merseyrail Electrics have found that allowing low-skilled employees to gain experience of staff supervision can provide them with valuable experience whilst contributing to greater flexibility and efficiency in the organisation. These and several other employers mentioned that the process of acting up enabled them to appraise an employee for progression to a supervisory role and provided the flexibility to cover for sickness, holidays and maternity leave. Although not always reported as a formal part of their progression strategies, these organisations said that encouraging employees to experience a team leader or supervisory role was established practice.

- *Team working/Project working/Secondments*

Providing opportunities for employees to work in different teams and on specific internal projects, and enabling secondments to different areas within an organisation, allows those employees to work alongside colleagues in various roles and with different levels of experience and seniority.

At Centrax Turbine Components, those expressing interest in progression are usually invited to take part in a Continuous Improvement Group or become part of a Problem Solving Team. The company believes that this strategy allows the employee to learn from their colleagues and explore their own knowledge, skills, and limitations. It also allows them to demonstrate their competence and further potential. Centrax also mixes off-the-job training in leadership and on-the-job learning, including secondment into different teams, to facilitate progression into supervisory roles.

For Burnley Borough Council the existence of a number of corporate groups that bring together different staff levels and functions to undertake specific project work (for example, preparing for Investors in People) offers a particularly important progression route. The University of Derby recently successfully seconded two members of the cleaning staff to support administration teams within the university. Both these employees then went on to join the administration team on a permanent basis.

- *Mentoring and coaching*

The most commonly identified and discussed benefits of mentoring are those related to the development of human resources. Mentoring and coaching can contribute to employee motivation, job performance and retention. They can also deliver improvements to an organisation and help embed learning.

Mentoring was common practice among a number of employers with some, such as G4S Northern Ireland, Acorn Court Care Home, and the University of Durham, providing mentors to employees upon recruitment. At G4S Northern Ireland mentoring is available to all staff. Employees can meet mentors monthly to discuss any issues relating to their job and career and receive advice and guidance about opportunities and the skills development required to access them. G4S also encourages peer support, such as where employees that have undertaken learning and development discuss and champion the process with their colleagues.

New hourly-paid entrants to the Asda shop floor are mentored into their role by a 'Training Buddy'. Others, such as Eastgate Primary School and Merseyrail Electrics, provide mentoring to staff who are actively involved in development and progression activities to support them and to offer advice and guidance. At an international logistics operator interviewed for the research, progression into management positions is supported by formal mentoring.

Among the less formal types of staff development at Shephard Media is the practice of 'twinning' junior staff with more senior colleagues to support the transmission of organisational knowledge, values and practices.

### **4.3 Human Resource development**

The Human Resource development policies and practices of employers have significant influence on the nature and extent of progression from the lower end of the organisation. Consequently, how they recruit, retain and develop their employees is fundamental to providing progression opportunities.

- *Defined/developed progression pathways*

Nearly all of the case study organisations had defined and developed progression pathways. Some branches or sites of larger organisations followed the established policies and procedures set out in company-wide HR strategies, whilst the single site organisations had tended to develop their own pathways based on their particular needs and circumstances. Some of the employers have a mix of structured, formal progression pathways operating alongside less structured, more informal routes.

Some of the larger employers have developed relatively sophisticated approaches to progression. For example, McDonalds have developed a prospectus which clearly outlines the progression pathways available to all employees, from those employed on temporary work experience to those managing a restaurant. The career path is outlined below, and provides current and prospective employees with a clear view of the career ladder at McDonalds. The prospectus is used to promote the career path both within McDonalds and through external agencies such as Careers Advisory Services in schools.

#### McDonalds Career Path

Consultants (e.g. Franchise/Operations)
Business Manager
First Assistant Manager
Second Assistant Manager
Trainee Business Manager
Shift manager
Crew Trainer
Customer Care Assistant
Apprentice
Crew member
Work experience

It outlines the responsibilities associated with various roles, the skills required and the rewards associated with each position to ensure that employees are aware of the potential to progress in the business. The company have developed and deliver a range of nationally recognised qualifications to support the development of employees at each stage of their progression from Levels 1 and 2 certificates in Adult Literacy and Numeracy, through Intermediate Apprenticeship in Hospitality and Catering (Level 2), a Level 3 Award in Shift Management and Supervising Food Safety in Catering to a Foundation Degree in Managing Business Operations.

- *Pay and incentives*

Two organisations reported the use of pay and incentives as a part of their progression practices. At the University of Durham, low-skilled staff (for example, a Grounds Maintenance employee at the university's Grade 2 staff level) can, like other university colleagues, progress within their grade via an annual increment and can also receive an 'exceptional contribution payment', if they are appraised as having 'outperformed' their role consistently.

This progression can also be accelerated, providing the employee the opportunity to apply for a higher graded role more quickly. Currently, at Eastgate Primary School, the Learning Support Assistants are all on a learning programme and are being paid for additional hours whilst being trained in, for example, arranging and overseeing playground games, improving the lunchtime dining room experience of the children, and first aid. This learning is provided by a trainer who has been engaged to undertake the training at the school.

- *Training and development*

Access to training and development opportunities are vital if a low-skilled employee is to gain the general or firm-specific competences and skills required for progression to occur. Many studies have highlighted the lack of training opportunities made available by many employers for their low-skilled, low-paid staff and this is seen as a significant barrier to progression for these employees, as well as a major contributing factor to the high staff turnover often experienced by these organisations.

However, for all the case study employers, training is regarded not only as essential at all levels, including for entry-level and low-skilled positions, but also as a pre-requisite for progression. It was also common practice among the employers to offer induction training designed to introduce new employees to the basic competences and requirements of their new role. At Marriott Hotels, for example, when individuals start working at a hotel they are given a three-day orientation programme which provides the core skill requirements and outlines the expectation for their role.

- *Accredited training*

The majority of employers accredit their training for low-skilled staff via various relevant NVQ qualifications or Apprenticeships.

Amongst those companies offering low-skilled staff the opportunity to study for NVQs, Morrisons, G4S Northern Ireland, Centrax and Merseyrail Electrics place the qualification at the centre of their progression strategies, alongside the firm-specific competencies and skills that employees must gain in order to move up.

At Merseyrail, any new recruit without accredited basic qualifications is encouraged to take Key Skills English and Maths, delivered to staff by UnionLearn. Achieving this qualification acts as a 'baseline' from where opportunities to take further accredited training can arise. As it is not always possible for some staff to attend training due to shift patterns or their location, the company is also set to introduce a range of e-learning packages.

G4S Northern Ireland runs a structured NVQ programme that provides opportunities for staff to achieve awards at all NVQ levels 2-4. From here they can move on further to foundation degree level and, potentially, postgraduate study. The company makes the NVQ Level 2 in Team Leading, Business Administration or Customer Service available to all permanent employees (including part-timers) and these can, if required, include a literacy and numeracy element. For supervisory roles at the company, the recruitment process is quite rigorous, including verbal and numerical testing, scenario testing and competency-based questions for site-based supervisory positions. As the company fills two-thirds of its vacancies through internal routes, staff that have successfully completed the relevant NVQ programme are often well-placed to perform well in such tests.

A central element of McDonalds' progression strategy is an e-learning portal, 'Our Lounge', and the provision of apprenticeships, including a Level 2 Apprenticeship in Multi-Skilled Hospitality. The apprenticeship incorporates on-the-job learning, off-the-job learning and online assessment.

Eastgate Primary School and the University of Durham both describe themselves as learning organisations in the broadest sense. The university has supported low-skilled employees to gain accredited literacy and numeracy skills, as well as facilitating staff to move on to part-time undergraduate programmes. The university is also an Institute of Leadership and Management accredited centre and offers the Level 2 Team Leader programme that can include low-skilled staff from the Estates and Buildings department who want to progress to Team Leader.

At Eastgate Primary School, a former volunteer Teaching Assistant who was supported through their NVQ Levels 2 and 3 in Childhood Studies is now partway through a foundation degree with a view to becoming a fully qualified teacher. Although the school does not have the resources to financially support the employee for the foundation degree, it does offer paid time off for study – a half-day per week to attend classes at the local Further Education college.

Morrisons established a Skills Academy in 2009, which offers a range of training and development tools for staff. The Academy has developed partnerships with academic institutions, accrediting, training and development organisations and won the overall National Training Award at the 2011 National Training Awards. The Academy offers Level 2 Retail Apprenticeships and stand-alone NVQs. Asda also has a Skills Academy (launched in June 2011) from where it operates its in-house training. The Academy also provides access to assessment for retail Apprenticeships at levels 2, 3 and 4.

- *Informal learning or 'on-the-job' learning*

Informal or 'on-the-job' learning usually involves a combination of learning from other colleagues and learning from personal experience. Several of the employers provide informal learning and on-the-job training that contributes to internal progression.

R&R Ice Cream offers its own internal 'RVQ' (the Richmond Vocational Qualification) which is offered to the low-skilled operational staff. Technical staff at the company must hold specific technical skills and/or qualifications. The RVQ was developed following a review of the company's former offer of the NVQ in Food Manufacturing. R&R Ice Cream found this qualification to be too generic and did not provide staff with the appropriate skills.

R&R is one of only two ice cream manufacturers operating in the UK. The 'RVQ' was therefore designed by the company to focus on ice cream manufacture specifically and involves a three-stage process. Low-skilled employees in entry-level positions begin as Production Operatives. From here they can progress to Machine Operative, Quality Operative and Multi-skilled Operative. Each of these positions is achieved through the successful completion of the relevant 'RVQ' grade. The 'RVQ' process includes some basic skills (e.g. food hygiene, health and safety and team working) but also offers the firm-specific skills that are necessary for progression.

Asda operates 16 of its stores as Stores of Learning (SOLs). These stores operate as any other, except that are set up to provide access to learning for employees from across the company. Employees are trained in product knowledge, systems and processes, or supervisory skills. Individual stores also offer a 'Step On' programme comprising modules specifically focused on the Asda business – including data, finance, management and the like. Those low-skilled staff seeking progression will need to successfully complete 'Step On'.

Within Bupa Care Homes staff can also become 'cascade trainers' in Fire or Moving and Handling. These are compulsory aspects of carer training which individuals then champion and teach to others within their care setting. Through on-the-job training and qualifications carers can seek progression to the role of senior carer when opportunities arise.

- *Staff appraisal, personal development planning and careers advice*

Several employers use staff appraisal systems and processes and monthly and/or annual staff review meetings to focus on development and progression opportunities. At the University of Derby, the Development Performance Review is a regular interview with line managers where performance is mutually assessed and training development needs are recorded. Staff at Marriott Hotels undergo a half-yearly interim and annual full performance review that includes a training needs analysis relating to core process/procedural and technical skills, depending on the job role.

In all cases staff appraisal also includes both formal and informal career advice, with some employers able to tailor development opportunities to suit an employee's internal career path. However, a common view among the employers was that all their staff, including entry-level and other low-skilled employees, should display the appropriate commitment and dedication to development and progression.

For an international logistics supplier progression is largely, although not exclusively, through self-motivation. Here, an employee's interest in, and capability for, progression is identified via a performance review process. This process allows the employee and their manager to evaluate performance and identify training and development opportunities.

At Warburtons, progression occurs through self-motivation and it is the company's Self Development Planning system that facilitates opportunities for development and progression. During Self Development Planning, employees interested in progression are identified and referred to opportunities for progression. These opportunities can include off-the-job training, on-the-job training, mentoring and coaching, and PC-based learning.

- *Progression of young people*

Several organisations provide opportunities for young employees. At AMEC Oil and Gas, the craft and trades workers enter the company as school leavers via a Level 2 Apprenticeship, which comprises off-the-job training delivered in-house and on-the-job learning through mentored support from a manager.

Morrisons has recently developed their Manufacturing Sponsored Degree Programme for 18 year olds to join the company in a trainee management role in food production. They also undertake a fully paid BSc (Hons) in Management and Business. However, these trainees must be qualified to NVQ Level 3 to be able to apply for these opportunities.

Asda offer a range of graduate programmes in retail management, distribution, finance, marketing, e-commerce and human resources for graduates with 2:1 honours degrees, as well as in-house employees who have been identified by their manager as appropriate for this higher learning.

At Bernard Matthews, apprentices are recruited from the food process line and participants require no pre-existing qualifications other than sufficient basic level English and Maths to be able to achieve the Literacy and Numeracy Key Skills component of the apprenticeship. The Apprenticeship is open to employees of all ages. Very few participants have failed to successfully complete the Technical Operations Apprenticeship. Those who succeed, then progress onto an Engineering Apprenticeship.

Burnley Borough Council has created a number of trainee and apprenticeship roles that combine learning and progression opportunities for new recruits. Merseyrail Electric is planning to introduce a 5-year Apprenticeship programme where successful participants will move into a managerial role. Bupa Care homes provide opportunities for young staff to pursue apprenticeships in health and social care. McDonalds have created a learning environment which is heavily influenced by the interests of their young workforce.

- *Recruitment*

A wide range of practices and preferences in relation to recruitment were reported with formal, informal and a mix of both approaches discussed. Importantly, all of the employers confirmed that they will recruit unemployed people for their low-skilled vacancies if they display the right attitude, behaviours and sense of commitment. Furthermore, entry-level positions are often seen as first steps on the progression ladder.

Asda has publicly stated that they 'hire for attitude and train for skill'. Acorn Court Care Home is another employer that is happy to recruit committed individuals who may have no qualifications at all. With training being a central feature of staff development and progression, the view is that if the 'right' person is recruited then the 'right' competences and skills the organisation needs can be gained by the low-skilled entrant. Even at the application stage, Acorn Court looks beyond the recruitment process to where the new employee might progress. When Merseyrail Electrics recruits low-skilled employees, applicants are assessed on a higher-skilled job, so that the company can be sure it has secured new staff of the right calibre.

A particular example of targeted recruitment comes from from ITV in Yorkshire. In 2003, and in partnership with Screen Yorkshire, the company looked at how they could better engage with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people and move towards a workforce which better reflected their broadcast audience. The positive action initiative that followed was called the Foundation Placement Scheme, which ran for eight years in Leeds and four years in Manchester. Several cohorts of trainees were recruited, with most having been unemployed prior to the initiative. Some also held no qualifications and had no prior work experience. The Foundation Placement Scheme had a more than a 70% success rate in delivering trainees into jobs within ITV, another media employer, or freelance work, and in some cases beneficiaries set up their own production companies. Many of these trainees have subsequently progressed into supervisory and management positions.

- *Pre-employment programmes*

Merseyrail Electrics is currently in discussion with Jobcentre Plus about how they might engage with the Work Programme and provide pre-employment opportunities to unemployed people. Shephard Media hosts work experience students but these tend to be responses to proactive requests. The company has in the past recruited staff as a result of their performance in work experience placements. Several large organisations, including McDonalds and Morrisons, contribute to pre-employment programmes and work with jobseekers to develop their skills prior to offering some of them job opportunities.

- *Employee representation*

Given the scope of the research, it was not possible to pursue the contribution of employee representation in any real detail with the employers but R&R Ice Cream, for example, mentioned that they encourage employees to take part in the firm's internal Consultation Committee. For their part, Merseyrail Electrics work with UnionLearn to offer a range of training and development courses for staff.



# 5 Outcomes

If more businesses are to be encouraged to provide progression opportunities for their low-skilled employees, they need to believe that this will have a positive impact on their organisation. Employers who participated in the research were able to identify a range of key outcomes that they had experienced.

The case studies indicate that organisations derive a variety of benefits from their progression practices. An overall view expressed by Marriott Hotels was that this process “makes good business sense” and this sentiment was shared by many of the participants. Below are some of the specific reasons why businesses consider this to be the case.

## 5.1 Evaluating the outcomes of progression practices

Few businesses formally evaluate progression practices or measure impact on the business in a formal way. One exception to this is Merseyrail Electrics, who monitor progression and calculate how much external advertisement, recruitment, corporate induction and training would have cost. These calculations form part of the company’s new Integrated Resource Management System. As a result, they conclude that they are more efficient and more productive as an organisation because of their training and progression policies. They have also observed a marked improvement in customer service.

Eastgate Primary School also undertakes an assessment of its progression practices, producing regular reports for the Board of Governors. The head teacher is responsible for assessing the impact that the training has had on the school’s performance.

A small number of the case study organisations were able to provide estimates of the proportion of low-skilled employees that progress to more senior positions within their organisations. These ranged from around 10-15% to 30% in different businesses. Asda estimate that approximately 10% of hourly paid shop floor workers want to progress and that, of these, around 80% do so.

From a different perspective, Centrax, who manufacture machined components and assemblies for gas turbines, suggested that around half of their level 3 jobs in the business are filled through internal recruitment. At Morrisons, 95% of general store managers are promoted from within and 30% of the senior management began working on the shop floor.

## 5.2 Benefits for the organisation

For the majority of businesses, the benefits of providing progression opportunities are observed rather than formally measured and evidenced. They include:

- *Higher levels of staff retention/lower staff turnover*

Most of the case study organisations cited improved staff retention and lower staff turnover as a benefit. Several were able to quantify this. Enterprise Rent-a-Car have a staff retention rate in excess of 75% in their call centre, compared to an industry average of around 50%. Morrisons believe that staff turnover has reduced by 6% as a result of their “shop floor to top floor” policy.

The benefits of low staff turnover were acknowledged by the University of Derby in contributing to a “generally positive collegiate atmosphere”. In a stable employment structure, however, with little opportunity for an overall increase in staff numbers, the opportunities for upward progression can be limited, as are the opportunities to bring in “people from outside to freshen things up”.

Staff retention was also linked to the ability to retain key skills and experience within organisations, with Centrax commenting that “bringing up from within helps us get the skills we need to do

business”. They indicated that internal promotion requires less of a learning curve than is the case with external recruitment, as individuals employed through the latter route will need to be taught about the standards that are required and be inducted into the organisational culture. JMR Vehicle Solutions share this view, suggesting that internal staff are a “known quantity” and can, therefore, be seen as less of a risk than making an external appointment.

Whilst the need to retain skills within a business was often observed, responding to skills shortages within the wider workforce did not appear to be a major driver for providing progression opportunities.

- *Cost savings*

Cost savings are largely linked to staff retention levels, with a number of organisations indicating that they make significant savings on recruitment, induction and training costs. For example, it costs £650 to recruit a new crew member at McDonalds. They indicated that their approach “has almost eradicated the short-term labour turnover that affects many organisations operating in the sector”. Asda also identified cost savings, made because by progressing they need to train fewer new staff to understand their products and systems and the way in which their shops operate.

Whilst there are costs associated with training existing staff, these are offset by savings on recruitment costs and by the associated increases in productivity amongst newly promoted staff. R&R Ice Cream believe that their progression strategy has helped to lower manufacturing costs because they now have a committed and stable workforce with improved manufacturing skills. Efficiencies have increased because their employees have gained a broader range and greater depth of firm-specific skills. The HR Director at R&R commented that “we believe there is a major link between giving people these progression opportunities and the improved efficiencies we have seen in the business”. Centrax have identified that there is less ‘time lost’ while learning the job and fewer costly production errors by employees who have been internally progressed in comparison with those who are externally recruited.

A further cost saving was identified by the University of Derby where, as a result of training, internal staff are now able to undertake certain routine tasks that at one stage would have to have been contracted out.

- *Increased staff morale and motivation*

Providing progression opportunities within the workplace is perceived as having a positive impact on staff morale and motivation. A number of businesses, including Asda, Morrisons, and Bernard Matthews, reported that witnessing colleagues’ progression and seeing that there are opportunities in the business to move forward can be “highly motivating”, even for those who have no ambition to progress

The process of progression also contributes to the development of role models within an organisation. At Merseyrail Electrics, the progression of staff that have successfully completed training packages is regarded as a motivating force, encouraging others to undertake training to improve their future prospects.

- *Flexible and responsive workforce*

One of the key ways in which businesses facilitate progression from low-skilled occupations is by providing employees with opportunities to experience different roles within the organisation. In so doing, they develop a workforce with a range of skills, increased knowledge of other business functions and processes; and who are able to cover different jobs within the business.

Celotex and Enterprise Rent-a-Car indicated that by enabling staff to undertake a variety of roles within the business (“job roving” as termed by Enterprise), sometimes on a temporary basis, moving both across and upwards, they have established a flexible and responsive workforce that is able to adapt to peaks and troughs in their workload and provide cover for staff absence/illness.

At Acorn Court Care Home, the benefit of having staff 'act up' to the next grade or supervisory level is that they have developed a pool of staff who can readily move to new Carebase sites, are familiar with the jobs required and the Carebase ethos, and therefore provide a valuable contribution to the establishment of new care homes.

For Eastgate Primary School, qualified teaching assistants are able to take over classes when teachers are absent through illness or training. As a result, the school has fewer requirements for supply teachers and there is continuity for pupils who are taught by someone who knows them well and who they can trust.

- *Tailored skills*

Being able to tailor employee skills according to business need is a huge benefit. Dickinson Rabbitte found that training up individuals who join the firm in entry level positions as administrators provides them with the right kind of employees to progress later on, as they are already adept at preparing and drawing up bills and schedules in the house style.

- *Understanding of the business*

Staff that have progressed through organisations have a greater understanding of the culture, expectations and operation of the business, which can take time to develop amongst new employees. R&R Ice Cream observed that progressed staff have a far greater sense of responsibility. They not only understand the business better, but also have a greater understanding of how their knowledge and skills contribute to the company's success.

- *Employee engagement and improved quality, customer service and satisfaction*

Progressing staff has additional, positive, "knock-on" effects on overall quality, customer service and customer satisfaction. These effects were widely reported.

JMR Vehicles Solutions' practice of progressing people from within is felt to be key to retaining their reputation for quality and customer service, which is critical for their business to thrive. McDonalds reported that "the real benefits come from engaging staff. The number of employees who feel proud to work at McDonalds has risen to a record high and that is reflected in our customer service and financial performance".

Centrax reported that providing progression opportunities improves quality and reduces error as the workforce understands what kind of quality is expected of them. Warburtons echoed these findings, indicating that staff who have progressed through the organisation make a significant contribution to quality control procedures. It was also acknowledged, however, that there needs to be a balance between internal and external recruitment, as external recruitment can bring its own benefits in terms of new ideas and new ways of working.

For Burnley Borough Council, increasing staff engagement and satisfaction as a result of the provision of training and development, mentoring and coaching and access to professional career guidance has had a positive impact on the organisation's business and its relationship with customers. The Council has seen a steady increase in customer satisfaction, which is considered to be attributable to the increase in staff satisfaction and confidence.

In the care homes environment, Bupa Care Homes strongly felt that residential care is improved as a result of the progression opportunities, because consistency of care and familiarity with staff is of critical importance.

In a different context, YTV's Foundation Placement Scheme, which involved the development of a 12-month pre-entry level paid training programme for Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic candidates in order to ensure that the make-up of the workforce better reflected that of the viewing audience, is

considered to have had a positive impact on screen content, particularly in the area of news and documentaries. In this case, the specific recruitment of employees from differing backgrounds has led to stories being covered which may not previously have been aired, and new community voices being heard.

- *Productivity*

A further “knock-on” effect of providing progression opportunities is the potential for improved performance. The majority of the case study organisations were unable to estimate the impact of their practices in relation to this, simply reporting anecdotally that they have had a positive effect on productivity – especially within Marriott Hotels, JMR Vehicles Solutions and Merseyrail.

The overall philosophy in relation to this is epitomised by Enterprise, who work by the principle that “if you look after your employees and customers then growth and profitability will follow”.

Morrisons indicated that there has been a 7% increase in productivity associated with their progression approach, whilst Dickinson Rabbitte commented that having loyal staff whose knowledge and experience has been maximised and retained through training, development and support has resulted in improved performance and productivity.

- *Reputational benefits*

The employers acknowledged that there are reputational benefits associated with providing opportunities for staff. Skipton Building Society recognise that providing training and development opportunities is a key facet of their employer brand and they have a vision to be the most recommended mutual both by their customers and as an employer. For Marriott Hotels, recognition has come in the form of being the highest rated hotel chain in the Sunday Times Best Companies to work for listings; whilst G4S Northern Ireland were recognised as a Top Employer by the Corporate Research Foundation in 2011.

### **5.3 Individual progression pathways**

Individual progression pathways vary significantly. Employers noted that some individuals take a fairly linear route, moving directly up the hierarchy to their new position. There are also those who have made a number of moves within the organisation, some horizontal, in order to increase their experience and be better prepared for more senior positions when those opportunities arise.

For the individuals who progress, the main benefits are greater job satisfaction and increased rewards and recognition, along with increased staff confidence and morale as a result of gaining recognition from colleagues and managers.

The practices adopted by employers provide opportunities for individuals to develop within organisations, and, in some cases, change job roles completely, enabling them to forge new career paths. At the University of Derby there are examples of cleaning staff that, after training, were seconded to support administration teams within the university, and then secured the jobs that came up in this area.

At Enterprise Rent-a-Car, progression routes enable staff to move into specialist roles such as HR without the initial requirement for HR qualifications. Similarly, at Marriott Hotels there are opportunities to transfer across disciplines, evidenced by the fact that six members of the HR team began working in the food and beverage area.

In organisations where opportunities for progression to a more senior position are limited due to the structure of the business, a range of alternative benefits are offered to staff to reward performance. Shephard Media is a small organisation with a relatively flat hierarchical structure. As a result, good performance is rewarded through salary increases and flexible work opportunities, rather than through conventional methods of promotion. Shephard Media recognise that it is inevitable that, at times, staff will move on to other organisations if appropriate progression

opportunities are not available, although the company maintains contact with high quality ex-employees so that they can alert them to any new opportunities that arise. Marriott Hotels similarly acknowledge that staff may leave if a more senior position is not available at the point in time that they are hoping to progress; although at Marriott opportunities are quite widely available, albeit they require staff mobility as they can be in different hotels across regions.

Individual progression is dependent not only on opportunities being available, but also on the individual having the appropriate skills and attributes to be able to work at a higher level. A number of organisations indicated that, whilst they provide the opportunities and support which can enable staff to progress, it is up to individuals to take those opportunities and to prove that they have the capability, commitment and drive to do so. Centrax, for example, indicated that most staff who progress tend to be “motivated self-starters” who make known their desire and interest in progressing and that line managers then look to support those that have the capacity to do so. Asda identified the key to individual success as being flexible, keen and prepared to “go above and beyond the basic expectations”.

# 6 Conclusions and implications

## 6.1 Enablers of progression

This chapter draws conclusions based on the analysis presented so far<sup>13</sup>. In particular, it identifies a number of progression 'enablers' which are present across the case study organisations. Where the following factors or attitudes are in place, progression is more likely to take place or easier to make happen.

### ***1. A clear commitment is made by senior managers to encourage and enable progression and a "culture" of progression***

Amongst the case study organisations there is a clear commitment by senior managers to encourage and enable progression for their low-skilled employees. This commitment is based on a rationale relating to retention, productivity and reputation, and is then reinforced through all levels of line management. When management commitment has become embedded within the organisation, progression becomes part of the organisational culture or ethos. It is clear that the case study employers regard their low-skilled employees as a talent pool, rather than a peripheral group of workers with no attachment to the organisation beyond any concerns related to the variation in the quantity of labour input.

### ***2. There is a systematic approach to human resource development and allocation***

All of the case study organisations have a systematic approach to human resource development: including dedicating the appropriate time, resource and expertise required to underpin progression. There was also evidence of certain high performance working practices among the employers, with a clear commitment to progression led by senior managers, supported by appropriate work organisation arrangements and human resource development.

HR processes such as recruitment, induction and appraisals are key and are aligned to general development and progression opportunities. For some of these employers the recruitment process is designed around future progression. For example, some employers only recruit at the bottom of their occupational ladder while others recruit to a broader job specification than necessary to allow for future moves.

An early appraisal of progression potential among new low-skilled recruits often forms part of an established and planned HR strategy that considers all new employees to have the potential to progress. In some cases, attitudes and attributes are appraised informally – particularly but not exclusively among the medium and small organisations – while in others, more formal appraisal methods are relied upon, such as the skills matrix at Celotex and the competence matrices used at Asda and WM Morrison. Following this, performance is assessed and discussion about options and potential for progression take place as part of the appraisal process.

For larger employers, a basket of HR practices are used, whereas for the small and medium-sized organisations the balance between a range of formal and formal practices reflects their particular business need.

Some employers did comment on their attempts to meet quality of life considerations, such as McDonalds' 'Our Lounge' e-portal employee advice and guidance initiative and Merseyrail Electrics' efforts to help staff with confidence building and organising training around different shift patterns designed to contribute to an improved work-life balance.

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<sup>13</sup> The timescale available for the research did not provide us with the scope to investigate further aspects of the 'bounded' career and 'lifestyle career' models beyond the anecdotal evidence offered by some of the interviewees with regards to their work/life balance policies and/or practices. Furthermore, a note of caution is necessary given the purposive sampling undertaken for the project in order to focus on employers that have established progression practices.

### **3. *Appropriate internal resource is dedicated to training and other forms of development***

Central to these strategies is the provision of training – both accredited and informal – which is viewed as a pre-requisite for staff development and progression. However, training is offered to all low-skilled employees in the case study organisations, whether linked to progression specifically or staff development more generally.

A variety of training and development practices were in place or in the process of being developed to help open up progression pathways for all employees, ranging from offering apprenticeships and mentoring to the provision of e-learning. In some cases, these were further supported with other measures, such as facilitating job share for certain higher-skilled roles or allowing for part-time supervisory roles.

### **4. *Employees understand progression and are motivated to perform well***

Progression is enabled where low-skilled employees understand the way that progression works within that organisation, where they can identify internal progression pathways, and can access the opportunities to pursue them. Furthermore, individual motivation is key. Many of the employers in the case studies noted that the majority of their staff were happy in their current role and didn't want to progress. The employers noted that employee motivation was infectious. Low-skilled employees are able to see their colleagues progress, which employers believe is highly motivating.

For those employees who do want to progress, individual performance is also key. Low-skilled employees displaying the 'right' behaviours and attitudes are given the opportunity to access training and development with a view to progression. However, there was also no sense among the case study employers that the length of tenure in a low-skilled role plays a part in the decision of managers to progress the employee.

Employees must also be prepared to dedicate the appropriate time and application to the training and learning that are needed to facilitate any move up into a higher-skilled role. This may involve a willingness to be flexible on the part of the employee as horizontal moves and/or training may involve working different hours or at different sites.

### **5. *Peer support mechanisms are in place***

Peer support operates as a complement to management support. In organisations where there is a strong commitment to progression, staff are encouraged to offer informal and formal guidance and support to those following them through progression pathways. Examples of this include schemes such as linking employees together through "buddy" systems that provide support in addition to that from management or other more senior staff.

Sometimes the peer support or mentoring was provided by those who had made a similar progression from a similar role. In this sense progression in these organisations is self-reinforcing, as previously progressed employees are necessary for other employees to progress. Issues of scale are, however, important as these practices were most common among the medium and large organisations interviewed.

The case study employers all had specific strategic and operational reasons for progressing their low-skilled staff. Many were growing and anticipated further opportunities for recruitment and progression in the near future.

### **6. *There is organisational growth and a long-term perspective, and staff turnover is sustainable***

Many of the case study employers were undergoing growth in employee numbers, despite the difficult economic situation. This suggests growth is an important enabler as it creates

opportunities for individuals to progress into. However, there is also a longer-term dimension to this. Employers that take a long-term view and anticipate growth try to anticipate future skill needs and this tends to reinforce the need for progression of staff as they consider things such as succession strategies.

The culture of progressing from within is viewed by these employers as making a significant contribution to overall employee satisfaction, frequently evidenced by relatively low levels of staff turnover. Nevertheless, there is a trade-off between reduced turnover and opportunities for vertical progression, as appropriate higher-skilled roles must usually be vacant for a lower-skilled employee to move up into. However, some of the medium and large organisations are able to keep progression routes open through arranging horizontal moves such as work placements in other business areas, secondments, and acting up.

## **7. Organisational scale**

A number of the other enabling factors are themselves enabled by the size of the organisation. For example, larger employers are more likely to have large and well resourced HR departments. Furthermore, larger organisations have a greater breadth of roles to progress into and also tend to have a steady rate of turnover which allows further progression.

However, this isn't to say that smaller organisations are hamstrung by their scale. They tended to have fewer opportunities and were limited by structure but also demonstrated a willingness to be flexible by creating new roles or conflating existing roles for the benefit of progression.

## **6.2 Implications**

This research reveals that not all low-skilled jobs can be considered to be 'dead end' in terms of access to training and opportunities for progression. Further research in this area will need to carefully consider the effect of business size and industry sector.

Our case study employers were able to provide examples of former low-skilled employees who had been successfully progressed within the organisation and/or had subsequently moved on into similar or new roles in other organisations. Many had examples of very senior staff that had joined the organisation in entry-level roles. A number of them support their low-skilled employees to access and achieve accredited skills such as NVQs and Apprenticeships.

Some employers, then, do support progression for low-skilled workers. The challenge is to encourage more employers to do so. However, it is important to note that this research has focussed on progression within individual organisations. By contrast, a lot of progression, especially of the low skilled, is achieved by moving from one organisation to another. Furthermore, there is also a need to be realistic about the potential of the labour market for increasing the number of low-skilled jobs via pathways to progression. Progression is competitive and there are often many low-skilled workers chasing few progression opportunities.

The structure of the labour market itself is also a crucial factor. The levels of average and medium skilled jobs have declined; studies identify evidence of an 'hourglass economy', where there is a large group of skilled workers at the top and growing numbers of low-skilled or unskilled people at the bottom<sup>14</sup>.

Notwithstanding the above, this research has identified the employer practices that, if they become more widespread, will aid the progression of low-skill/pay workers:

- Understand that the low-skilled form a talent pool which can be used to fill entry-level roles and to provide human capital that can be progressed within the organisation;

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14 Sissons, P (2011) The Hourglass and the Escalator: Labour Market Change and Mobility Available: [http://www.theworkfoundation.com/DownloadPublication/Report//292\\_hourglass\\_escalator120711 \(2\) \(3\).pdf](http://www.theworkfoundation.com/DownloadPublication/Report//292_hourglass_escalator120711 (2) (3).pdf)



- Offering early coaching/mentoring, especially during inductions to support the transition into the organisation;
- Establishing a culture of progression - where leadership and commitment to providing opportunities for progression come from the top of the organisation and are reinforced through all levels of management;
- Providing horizontal opportunities for progression (e.g. placements, 'acting up', secondments)
- Ensuring that staff appraisals and reviews contain an emphasis on learning and development as well as performance on the job;
- Providing access to training and/or education (including e-provision to overcome barriers associated with travel, work patterns, or multi-site working);
- Offering explicit progression pathways linking roles and skills development, and communicating these to low-skilled employees;
- Monitoring and evaluating the business benefits of progression practices.

For smaller and medium-sized (SME) employers, short-term and cost-based pressures often require them to look for quicker and easier solutions than investing in employee progression. Better access to information on the applicability and usefulness of HRD to SMEs could help overcome the barriers to skills development and progression that exist amongst these firms. However, the evaluation of progression practices among employers is currently undeveloped. Consequently, hard evidence of employers' return on investment remains elusive.

Employers' needs are likely to be heterogeneous and it is important not to assume that the practices identified through this research offer a one-size-fits-all toolkit. Employers will need to develop their own approach to progression to meet their own business needs. Different employers may require their own mix of formal and informal approaches to progression, and there may be variations in policy and practice evident between different sites and/or different departments in a large organisation.

### 6.2.1 *Implications for individuals*

Employers can and do open the doors to progression, but individuals need to walk through them by displaying appropriate self-motivation and commitment to progression (e.g. a willingness to train, a willingness to take on greater responsibility, and, if possible, to travel).

Employees should wherever possible take responsibility for their own development and use the support available from their employer. However, not every employee will have the confidence to put themselves forward, and the role of employee representation can be very important in this respect.

## 6.3 **Conclusions**

Employment in the UK has been, up until the recession, relatively high, but there have always been problems with the low-pay no-pay cycle. This research has showed that where employers progress their staff, they reap a number of organisational benefits, including: improved retention of staff and the subsequent reduction of recruitment costs; a general improvement in employee satisfaction; greater organisational flexibility; improved productivity; and a positive impact on organisational reputation. So not only does progression represent good business practice, it also makes good business sense. With the myriad ways there are to progress employees – horizontally, vertically and via a range of training and development opportunities – and different time and resource

commitments associated with each one, there is a strong case for employers to help people progress out of the low-pay no-pay cycle and get into and on in work.

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills is a social partnership, led by Commissioners from large and small employers, trade unions and the voluntary sector. Our mission is to raise skill levels to help drive enterprise, create more and better jobs and economic growth.

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