

# How to offer career pathing and growth opportunities at your small business

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We hear again and again how career pathing is crucial to retaining star performers. But for small businesses, this idea can be somewhat problematic. After all, how can you offer your employees an attractive, forward-moving career path if your 40-person company only has a couple management positions?

But according to workforce consultant (and [Challenge Factory](#) founder) Lisa Taylor, career pathing can and should be an integral part of any small business talent strategy. In fact, she recently wrote a book on the topic: *[Retain and Gain: Career Management for Small Business](#)*.

We spoke with Taylor about offering career paths at small businesses, communicating with your employees about development, and more.

**Workopolis:** Your book title uses the phrase “career management.” Can you explain what that means?

LT: Career management is a lifelong pursuit that brings your skills and talents to the marketplace in a way that is fulfilling and rewarding for you and the organizations you work with.

There are principles that have been listed by the Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling (CERIC) that give us a good list of what’s included in career management. One is that it is lifelong. And, it’s a blend of your paid and unpaid activities – your education, your employment, entrepreneurship, volunteerism, all of those things make up your career. It’s also self-directed – each of us manage our own careers, but in

partnership with our employers. It means making the most of our talent and our potential. And, finally, it's a joint responsibility.

Often things like career management, employee engagement, and culture are considered part of large enterprises. But with 90.3 per cent of the Canadian private sector workforce going to work every day in small- and medium-size businesses, these are things that owners can use for a competitive advantage for their business, even with limited time and resources. It's not just the domain of the large company.

**And so, when it comes to helping employees with their career management, why are small businesses coming up short?**

The vast majority of small and medium sized businesses in Canada are microbusinesses, which means they have 10 or less employees. At that stage, it's not seen as a business priority to hire someone who is an HR manager. The owner or the founder typically takes on that role. And they continue to do that until people-related issues become unmanageable. But even in that language you can hear that the focus is on fire-fighting and reacting – more on the performance side of the house as opposed to career management. And those two things aren't the same.

Eventually, owners do bring someone on that has HR expertise when they start to find that there's increasing hiring and/or performance-related issues that they can't address alone. This means that the initial HR hire tends to focus mainly on issues related to recruitment and compliance, because those are the most immediate issues.

But to actually take a look at who your staff are, what they are looking for, where they need to develop, how those development needs match where the business is going, how you can provide ongoing growth opportunities, and how you can engage your staff to do increasingly more complex work in a way that they're excited about...that's all activity that owners often don't have time to implement. If you ask them if they *should* be looking at career management, they'll all say "absolutely. it's so important." But in the course of a small business owner's busy day, it just doesn't get to the top of the list.

**What are the major problems that arise when a company isn't addressing the things you mention above?**

Career management affects career satisfaction. Without it, employees start to look other places. We found, in our research, that 78 per cent of employees in small businesses said they would stay with their current employer if they saw a career path in front of them. So,



if an owner or manager articulated how employees could continue to grow, they would want to stay. But career conversations are seen as landmines and many leaders avoid them – without realizing that this can have a significant business impact, in terms of turnover in your business.

Leaders who avoid career management also lose out on engagement levels. Gallup talks about how higher engagement leads to lower absenteeism, fewer safety incidents, and fewer quality defects. If people are invested in their career, and they see their future at the company they're at, then they're invested in the quality of work that they're doing.

**Clearly, talking having career conversations is important. But how can a small business talk about career pathing with its staff when it has minimal room for promotions?**

I think it's important to separate career growth and organizational structure. Often, business owners are concerned that if they have a career conversation, someone's going to ask for a promotion or added salary. And small businesses are very flat organizations. They're not a bank – they don't have levels of positions and departments to move employees to. And so, they don't have the conversation at all.

The truth is that when people are asking about their future, what they're really asking about is whether they can continue to grow. And growth doesn't necessarily mean moving positions. Career conversations in small businesses can be as basic as focusing on what an employee hasn't had a chance to be exposed to, and how you can provide an opportunity to learn that part of the business over the next, say, six months or year.

Maybe you can give them an opportunity to be more public-facing and represent your company at an upcoming trade show, or at a conference. This would allow their expertise to get recognized in your industry, but also develop the employee with new types of skills, even if it's not part of their job description. And for people that aren't extroverted, that aren't looking for that kind of recognition, maybe they want to learn more about the fundamentals of how the business operates, for example.

***Retain and Gain* is filled with activities and initiatives to help small business owners start these career conversations with their employees. What are a couple simple ones to try?**

The first thing that an owner can do is think about their own career. Think about one defining moment in your own career, write it down, and then consider sharing it with your team and explaining why that moment was so meaningful. And then use that as a jumping off point to ask your employees about what has been meaningful to them.

A second thing owners can do is to call their staff. Find the time to have a 10-minute conversation that's separate from the busyness of the day, and call your staff without any agenda. Let them know up front when they take your call that you're calling just to check in, that you have about 10 minutes, that if there's something that comes up that needs more time you'll be happy to schedule it.

But really, you just want to spend 10 minutes talking with them, seeing what's going on with them and how they're doing. And let them lead the conversation, instead of starting by saying "we need to have a career conversation." It sounds simple, but this one action is one of the most powerful things managers can do to engage their staff.

Employees may talk about things related to their career during these casual checkpoints, or they may talk about other things. Managers and owners are often surprised at what their employees want to use their 10 minutes for. And if you start to do that on a regular basis, you'll start to build the kind of relationship that includes ongoing career discussions, as opposed to it being a special event.

#### **Are there any major pitfalls to avoid?**

Know that there's a difference between having a career conversation and a performance discussion. Performance discussions deal with an employee not meeting expectations in some aspect of their work, or focus on an issue that has come up related to performance against stated goals.

That's a very different type of conversation from a career conversation, which takes a look at where the employee is going, what is it that they want to be doing, where the company is going, and where you can align these interests.

It is not focused on a particular action, or skill, or area that needs some kind of intervention. It's a broader, future-looking discussion. The way a manager would prepare for performance discussions compared with preparing for career conversations is completely different – with different desired outcomes.

*Lisa Taylor's book, [Retain & Gain: Career Management for Small Business](#), is available for download or purchase [here](#).*

