
Career Conversations in Small- to Medium-Sized Businesses: A Competitive Advantage Conversations de carrière au sein de petites et moyennes entreprises : Une valeur ajoutée

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ABSTRACT

Career conversations are career-related dialogues between managers and employees that are intended to facilitate the development of specific goals and a plan for employee development that is mutually beneficial—to align the career goals of the employee with the organization's goals. The aim of these conversations is to address the turnover, engagement, and absenteeism issues employers currently face. This article focuses on a pilot study that designed, delivered, and assessed career conversation resources for managers and employees from small- and medium-sized enterprises. The results provide some evidence that career conversations are potentially beneficial to managers and employees. The mixed-methods design, results, and impacts of the intervention for both managers and employees, and implications for organizations and counselling are also discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Les conversations de carrière sont des dialogues entre gestionnaires et employés destinés à faciliter l'établissement d'objectifs précis et un plan de développement de l'employé mutuellement bénéfique—pour arrimer les objectifs de carrière de l'employé avec les objectifs organisationnels. Le but de ces conversations est d'adresser le taux de roulement, de stimuler l'engagement, et de contrer les problèmes d'absentéisme au travail. Cet article porte sur une étude pilote qui a conçu, livré, et évalué des ressources sur les conversations de carrière à l'intention des cadres et des employés dans de petites et moyennes entreprises. Les résultats indiquent que les conversations de carrière sont potentiellement bénéfiques pour les gestionnaires et les employés. La conception de méthodes mixtes, les résultats, et les impacts de l'intervention auprès des cadres et des employés, ainsi que les implications pour les organisations et pour le counseling sont discutés.

This article provides the description and results of research to evaluate an innovative human resource intervention (i.e., career conversations) that was developed to be used by managers with their employees in small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). A career conversation was defined for this project as a career-related dialogue between managers and employees that is supportive of employees' career

management. The purpose of a career conversation is to facilitate the development of specific goals and a plan for employee development that is mutually beneficial to the employee and the organization. It is intended to align the career goals of the employee with the corporate goals of the organization, thus potentially addressing any organization turnover, engagement, or absenteeism issues. The rationale for this research will be provided, along with a description of how career conversations were implemented by managers in SMEs. The impacts of career conversations on employees and managers also will be discussed. The article will conclude with recommendations arising from the study, and the implications for career development professionals and SMEs.

Career development has long been an integral part of counselling in Canada (Sinacore et al., 2011). There are numerous career counselling theories that attempt to address the career development of working adults, with those of Parsons (1909) and Super (1980) arguably being the most influential historically and today. However, extensive reviews of the career counselling literature over the past decade have revealed that little or no research has looked at the impact of change on mainstream workers' well-being or their career development needs (Borgen, Butterfield, & Amundson, 2010; Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Erlebach, 2010).

Today, both the person and the environment are undergoing constant upheavals and the normal healthy life-cycle transitions of working people are often disrupted. Ongoing and escalating change is accepted as a given in the business literature (e.g., Bridges, 1994; Kanter, 1999), yet only a few references to the impact of change and the resulting need for a new career counselling orientation were found in the psychology and counselling literature.

Career planning and development of workers has long been a responsibility of management, although many organizations may not think of this as an area of focus. Walker (1973) made the case nearly 40 years ago that organizations are engaged in human resource planning and career development through the way they attract, recruit, and orient new workers to the organization; match individual workers' interests and talents with organizational needs; train and monitor employee performance; and help workers prepare for satisfying and secure retirement. Despite the fact that the "new" psychological contract has supposedly shifted responsibility for career development from employers to workers (Rousseau, 1996, 2001, 2004), there is general recognition that respectful management actions, fair organizational practices, and effective communication are key in establishing and maintaining a supportive and harmonious work environment (Amundson, Borgen, Jordan, & Erlebach, 2004; Kelloway, Sivanathan, Francis, & Barling, 2005).

Walker (1973) also made the point that a key managerial job is that of guiding employees "through the process of matching individual interests and talents with opportunities" (p. 68). Although organizations have changed substantially in the last 25 years and job security through to retirement is no longer the norm (Borgen, 1997; Trevor-Roberts, 2006), an argument can be made that individual career planning as suggested by Walker is still a management issue. A recent Canadian survey reported that 74% of Canadians have only some idea or little idea

at all about what they need to do to advance in their organizations (Enviro-nics Research Group, 2010).

Today, organizations are concerned with recruiting skilled workers in a labour market that has a shortage of skilled workers, engaging workers so they are able to work creatively and thrive in an environment of constant change, reducing absenteeism, and retaining workers so organizations are able to realize their strategic goals (Amundson, 2007; Law, Flood, & Gagnon, 2008). However, there is ample evidence that high turnover and absenteeism due to mental health-related disability are making it difficult for employers in all sizes of companies to retain workers and keep them highly motivated and engaged (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2010). Performance management practices are not experienced as satisfactory by the majority of Canadians (Enviro-nics Research Group, 2010) and thus appear not to be effective vehicles for retaining or helping workers thrive in the workplace.

Results of recent studies at the University of British Columbia suggest that even workers who self-report as doing well with changes affecting their work are experiencing emotional reactions reminiscent of unemployment and burnout, thus impacting these workers' ability to thrive in the workplace (W. A. Borgen et al., 2010). These studies also found that management style and work environment factors hindered workers' ability to deal well with the changes they experienced, and were associated with illness, injury, decreased productivity, exhaustion, and detachment from their work and colleagues (Butterfield et al., 2010). Based on the results of 117 in-depth interviews, the importance of communication, connection, and support from workers' managers/supervisors arose as a major requirement for worker well-being and resilience. This finding is consistent with the Canadian healthy workplace model that includes safety in the workplace; work-life balance; a culture of support, respect, and fairness; employee involvement and development; and healthy interpersonal relationships at work (Kelloway & Day, 2005). The benefits of having these human resource/management practices in place are reported to be at the individual (i.e., psychological, physiological, and behavioural), organizational (i.e., turnover, performance, reputation, customer satisfaction, and "bottom line"), and societal (i.e., national health care costs, government programs) levels.

Within this context of ongoing change, increased demands, high turnover and absenteeism, and uncertainty, small-to-medium businesses with fewer than 500 employees face unique challenges related to supporting career development in the workplace (B. Borgen et al., 2010). These include less infrastructure, fewer support functions (such as human resource departments), and broader ranges of responsibilities within roles (W. A. Borgen et al., 2010).

To address these issues, the people most responsible for providing effective communication, connection, and support for workers are middle managers/supervisors. Their roles have changed significantly in recent years as organizations eliminated levels of the corporate hierarchy and delegated many senior management responsibilities to middle managers (Osterman, 2009). Today, middle

managers are considered to be the major agents for facilitating successful change in an organization, as subject matter experts in a broader range of areas, and as leaders with responsibilities for coaching and motivating employees (Dopson & Neumann, 1998; Stoker, 2006). Increased skill levels are required in these new roles, with researchers suggesting that in order to effectively coach employees, middle managers need superior influencing ability, emotional competence, astute relationship skills, and good communication skills (Sethi, 1999).

A recent literature review related to career development practices in the workplace suggests the benefits are many when properly done, regardless of the size of the organization (Butterfield, Lalande, & Borgen, 2009). For organizations, the possible benefits include attracting and retaining high-performing employees, developing future leaders, driving corporate culture, and creating a healthy workplace. For workers, the potential benefits include increased motivation, increased career direction and goals within the organization, and increased flexibility within a constantly changing work environment because they are able to set new goals and thus reduce uncertainty. Yet despite the advantages career development discussions could provide, few career development services are available for working adults. There also appears to be little support to assist managers in acquiring the new skills suggested by Sethi (1999) that are required to engage in career development conversations with employees. Traditional human resource training programs aimed at managers tend to focus on the content of new knowledge, rather than the process of communicating with workers.

Although there is not a commonly accepted term in the literature used to describe the career-related dialogues between managers and employees, the concept *career conversation* has been used to refer to the sharing of information related to career management, employee skills and performance, information about job and career path options within the workplace, training options, mentorship opportunities, career goal setting, and formation of action plans (Butterfield, Lalande, et al., 2009). What little research there is on this topic suggests well-designed and systematically implemented career conversations may result in considerable economic benefits for organizations (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2005) as well as career development benefits for employees resulting from a greater realignment of goals, objectives, expectations and activities of employees and employers (Kidd, Jackson, & Hirsh, 2003). To address the issues and needs of organizations and employees, particularly in SMEs where there are fewer resources available to address retention and employee development, this research was conducted to evaluate the value of career conversations for managers and employees of SMEs.

METHOD

A review of career conversation research and literature (Butterfield, Lalande, et al., 2009) identified the importance of specifying the skills and knowledge required by both the manager and the employee to participate in successful career conversations. To enable us to evaluate the impact of career conversations, it is also

imperative that managers use the same career conversation model and process. To this end, a manager training seminar and training guide were developed, along with a workbook that employees could utilize in preparing for a career conversation (Lalande, Borgen, & Butterfield, 2009a, 2009c).

The career conversation model utilized in the manager training guide and employee workbook is adapted from the *Starting Points: Finding Your Route to Employment* program (Westwood, Amundson, & Borgen, 1994). The *Manager Positioning System* (MPS) and *Employee Positioning System* (EPS) were developed as frameworks for the career conversation process (Lalande et al., 2009a, 2009c). These frameworks each consist of a number of challenges along with options for overcoming these challenges. The EPS refers to the challenges and options employees have when participating in career conversations. The MPS parallels the challenges and options in the EPS, but refers to challenges and options managers have in implementing the career conversations.

Manager Training Seminar

The manager training seminars were offered over 2 days. Each seminar began with a definition of career conversations along with the documented need for them. It then focused on an introduction and practice of the skills required, and ended with each participant leading a roleplayed career conversation. The manager participants received the *Orientation to Career Conversations: Manager Guide* (Lalande et al., 2009c), providing worksheets and information about conducting career conversations. Also developed was an *Orientation to Career Conversations: Facilitator Guide* (Lalande, Borgen, & Butterfield, 2009b) for facilitators of the manager training seminar. The manager training focused on how to effectively interact with employees utilizing an evolving focus on (a) the employee's readiness to consider career development opportunities, (b) the identification of two or three specific career development possibilities and any accompanying challenges to attaining them, (c) a review of the personal strengths or assets that will help the employee in moving toward these possibilities, (d) the development of a consultation strategy to enlist the assistance of others, and (e) completing an initial action plan for implementing their career development plan. The seminars were facilitated by two senior members of the research team who developed the seminars and have extensive experience in the career development field.

Employee Workbook

The *Career Conversations: Employee Workbook* (Lalande et al., 2009a) was developed as a resource employees could use to prepare for participating in a career conversation with their manager. It also offers resources for managers to use while conducting a career conversation.

Participants

The participants were managers (used synonymously with the term *supervisor* for the remainder of this article) and employees working for SMEs in Greater

Vancouver/Lower Mainland, British Columbia and Calgary, Alberta. The inclusion criteria for the managers and employees had no restrictions on age, ethnic heritage, or gender. All participants were required to read, write, and speak English. Managers were recruited first by means of word-of-mouth, a recruitment postcard, and a recruitment poster placed on an Internet-based networking tool called LinkedIn. After the managers were recruited and had attended the training seminar, research team members placed posters at the recruited managers' places of work to invite employees to participate in our study. The poster indicated that the employees were to contact the research team directly if they were interested in obtaining more information or volunteering. At no time were prospective participants approached directly by their managers to participate in this research project. Following their manager training, managers and employees scheduled and completed a career conversation, as time allowed.

There were 16 managers recruited (three from Greater Vancouver/Lower Mainland and 13 from Calgary and the surrounding region) and 8 employees (all from Calgary). Of the 16 managers, 15 were women and 1 was a man. They represented a wide range of employment sectors, including transportation, non-profit, education, and business and professional services. Through the duration of the research study, 13 managers withdrew from the research study at various times, citing challenges in implementing career conversations in their places of work. Ten managers withdrew from the study right after the career conversation training seminar because they were unable to begin the career conversation program in their place of work. Some managers, including the 3 Vancouver managers, did not have employees interested in participating in the research study. One manager withdrew after the managers' first interview due to a number of difficulties incurred from trying to implement the career conversation program in the workplace. However, this manager was willing to provide data for the managers' 6-month follow-up interview at the time of his or her withdrawal. Two managers withdrew from the study after the managers' 3-month follow-up interview and indicated they were not interested in completing the managers' 6-month follow-up interview. However, they were willing to provide data related to the managers' 6-month follow-up interview at the time of their withdrawal as well as complete the *cross-checking by participants* credibility check (Butterfield et al., 2009). In total, the data collection process of the research study ended with 11 participants, comprising 3 managers and 8 employees. The varying numbers of participants participating in each stage of data collection are provided below.

Procedure

Two 2-day career conversation training seminars were held for the managers at approximately the same time; one in Vancouver and one in Calgary. The workshop followed the *Manager's Orientation/Training Facilitator's Guide* (Lalande et al., 2009b, 2009c). The facilitators provided examples, resources, and materials to the managers, including the *Orientation to Career Conversations: Employee Workbook* (Lalande et al., 2009a). Managers were also given a digital audio recorder to use

during their career conversations with their employees and then to keep for their own personal use. The employees were asked to complete the exercises in the *Orientation to Career Conversations: Employee Workbook* (Lalande et al, 2009a) before attending their career conversation with their manager.

Data Collection

MANAGERS

Data were collected to determine whether the managers acquired the skills and knowledge to conduct career conversations. At the beginning of the career conversation training seminar, managers were asked to fill out a pre-training evaluation questionnaire. At the end of the training seminar, managers were once again asked to fill out the same questionnaire as a post-training evaluation. It inquired about their engagement in the training as well as the usefulness of the training. The evaluation questionnaire format was developed by researchers drawing from a successful quantitative evaluation form originally designed for a Counselling and Guidance in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) workshop (Borgen & Hiebert, 2008). Next, the managers were asked to use a Likert scale to evaluate their general experience within the seminar and to compare their knowledge of career conversations before and after the seminar. Finally, managers were asked to provide written responses to three questions: (a) What were the three best features of this seminar for you? (b) What were the three features of this seminar that were less relevant for you? and (c) Please provide additional comments about the seminar.

Career conversation. When they were available to do so, the managers and employees scheduled and completed the career conversation. Seven audio recordings of the career conversations (saved as .wav files) were e-mailed by the managers to one of the research team members to assess the career conversation skills and abilities demonstrated by the managers in their recorded career conversations.

The managers' first interview. After the career conversation, the managers were contacted to conduct an audio-recorded follow-up telephone interview aimed at understanding the usefulness of the training/orientation sessions to conduct career conversations. The interviews were completed within a month of completing the career conversation. Six managers completed the first managers' interview.

The managers' three-month follow-up (2nd) interviews. Three to 5 months after the career conversation, the managers were contacted to schedule a time to complete a semi-structured Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT; Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009) audio-recorded telephone interview. Six managers completed this interview.

The managers' six-month follow-up (3rd) interviews. Between 6 and 11 months after the career conversations between the managers and employees, the managers were contacted to schedule a time for a last interview to review the data analysis of their second interview and to answer interview questions about the impacts of the career conversations. Three managers agreed to participate in these interviews.

The intention of these interview questions was to better understand the managers' perception of the impacts of conducting career conversations within their place of work.

EMPLOYEES

As with the managers, the employees were contacted immediately after their career conversations. An in-person semi-structured ECIT (Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009) interview was completed with 8 employees within one to three months after the career conversation.

The employees' three-month follow-up (2nd) interview. Three months after the career conversation, the employees were contacted to review the data analyzed from their first interview as part of the credibility checks conducted for an ECIT study.

The employees' six-month follow-up (3rd) interview. Six months after the career conversation, the employees were contacted to arrange for their last interview in the research study. The intention of this interview was to better understand the employees' perspective of the impacts of conducting career conversations. Seven employees participated in these interviews.

Data Analysis

The data from questionnaires and interviews were analyzed to assess the effectiveness of the career conversation training seminar provided to the managers, and the employees' and managers' perceptions of their experiences of career conversations.

QUESTIONNAIRE

A questionnaire based on a template developed by Bryan Hiebert (Borgen & Hiebert, 2008) was used with the managers to evaluate the career conversation training seminar. The managers' pre-training and post-training responses to the questionnaire were consolidated and the Likert scale responses were averaged. Answers to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire were grouped together to identify common themes, and the number of responses in each theme was noted.

CHECKLIST

The checklist from the *Orientation to Career Conversations: Manager Guide* (Lalande et al., 2009c) was used to assess each recorded career conversation between the manager and employee. This checklist was developed as a summary of the skills and processes utilized during the stages of a career conversation. Comparing the audiotape and the checklist indicated the extent to which managers utilized the career conversation skills and processes that had been taught in the training seminar.

INTERVIEWS

Each audio-recorded interview was transcribed by either a research team member or an outsourced professional transcriber. The qualitative methods of analyzing the interviews followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis

procedure and the ECIT (Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009). Braun and Clarke suggested six steps in conducting thematic analysis: (a) familiarize yourself with the data, (b) generate initial codes, (c) search for themes through the grouping of codes, (d) review themes, (e) define and name themes, and (f) produce a report of the results. The process used to analyze information from the ECIT interviews involved identifying incidents that helped and hindered as well as wish list items (conditions or incidents that were not present but that were seen as being potentially helpful if they had occurred) and assigning them codes. Coded incidents were then placed in categories that were tested using a series of credibility checks. The following sections explain the data analysis of the ECIT and non-ECIT interviews in more detail.

ECIT interviews. The transcriptions of the ECIT interviews were entered into an ATLAS.ti software file. Data analysis and coding were completed in accordance with the ECIT procedures detailed by Butterfield, Borgen, et al. (2009). This involved highlighting and coding the participants' statements according to the contextual questions. Each helpful, hindering, and wish list item was coded by incident, its importance, and an example. ECIT credibility checks were also conducted to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. The codes were reviewed to identify common patterns and grouped into possible categories. The *participation rate* credibility check (Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009) was completed by calculating how many participants contributed a code to each category. For example, if 3 of the 6 managers interviewed contributed a total of 9 codes assigned to a category (out of a total of 50 codes found in the study), then a 50% participation rate was reported ($3 \text{ participants} / 6 \text{ total participants} \times 100$) with a frequency rate of 18% ($9 \text{ assigned codes} / 50 \text{ codes in total} \times 100$). The strength of the categories was determined by the level of participation and frequency rates. The higher the rate, the stronger the theme is considered to be (Borgen & Amundson, 1984).

The *placing incidents into categories by an independent judge* credibility check was conducted next (Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009). A research team member randomly chose 25% of the codes and e-mailed them to a second research team member with the generated categories and their operational definitions. The second research team member matched the codes to the categories and sent them back to the first research team member to compute the match rate (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005). The match rate was a comparison of the number of the codes matched to the same category by both research team members. The initial match rate of the managers' ECIT data analysis was 100% and the employees' was 67%. According to Andersson and Nilsson (1964), a match rate of 80% and better is considered credible. All discrepancies found in the ECIT interview matched codes were resolved between the research team members to achieve a 100% agreement rate (Andersson & Nilsson, 1964; Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009).

Another ECIT credibility check administered by the research team was the *cross-checking by participants* (Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009). The participants were e-mailed a copy of their own critical incidents and wish list items and their

matched categories. In the e-mail, the participants were requested to review the incidents and categories and consider the following questions outlined by Butterfield, Borgen, et al. (2009): (a) Do you feel the helping/hindering incidents and wish list items are correct? (b) Are there any missing? (c) Do you feel there is anything that needs to be revised? and (d) Do you have any other comments to add? These questions were asked to determine whether the participants felt comfortable with the research team's interpretations of the data.

Discrepancies expressed by the participants were handled in a slightly different manner. The employee participants had the final say with the identified critical incident items and wish list items and their matched themes. If the employees expressed a discrepancy with the identified critical incident items or wish list items, then the item was removed from the results. If the manager participants expressed a discrepancy with the items or matched themes, the research team member made a note and later forwarded it to one of the lead investigators to determine the appropriate course of action. Some of the employees were unable to complete a follow-up interview over the phone, so the questions were e-mailed to the participants to complete and e-mail back.

After the *cross-checking by participants*, the lead investigators completed the *expert opinion* credibility check (Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009). The lead investigators reviewed the categories and considered the following questions: (a) Are the themes useful? (b) Are they surprised by any of the themes? and (c) Is there anything missing based on their experience? (Butterfield et al., 2005; Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009; Flanagan, 1954).

Non-ECIT interviews. There were two types of non-ECIT interviews conducted in this study. The first was the managers' first interview after the audio-recorded career conversation. The second was the managers' 6-month follow-up interview regarding the impacts of conducting career conversations. The Braun and Clarke (2006) approach to thematic analysis approach was used with the ATLAS.ti software to identify and code the data extracts. A number of the ECIT credibility checks were also conducted with these data (Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009). These credibility checks included (a) the independent extraction of critical incidents, (b) the participation rate, (c) the placing of incidents into categories by an independent judge, (d) the expert opinion, and (e) theoretical agreement.

The percent of agreement of the *independent extraction of critical incidents* or data extracts was 72% (Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009). After the discrepancies were discussed between the first and second research team members, there was a 100% agreement rate. When an independent judge placed incidents into themes, there was a match rate of 96% (Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009). After a discussion about the discrepancies, there was a 100% concordance rate. When generating the themes, participation rates and frequency rates were also considered. The main difference between the data analysis of the managers' first interview and the ECIT interviews involved the analysis of the managers' first interview credibility checks. The managers' first interview data analysis did not include the ECIT cross-checking by participants credibility check (Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009).

The managers' 6-month follow-up interview data set was analyzed differently due to a time constraint to complete the project. The interviews were not audio-recorded. Instead, the research team member took notes during the interview and began to generate ideas for the themes during and after the interviews. Only a few of the ECIT credibility checks were completed, including (a) the participation rate, (b) the expert opinion, and (c) theoretical agreement (Butterfield, Borgen, et al., 2009).

RESULTS

Evaluation of the Manager Training Seminar

All the participants rated the seminar as useful, with an average rating of 3.33 out of 4 (from *unacceptable* to *exceptional*). They also all rated the workshop facilitation as being acceptable with an average rating of 3.47 out of 4. The self-ratings of the participants' levels of knowledge increased from before to after completing the career conversation training seminar: (a) by a 1.35 point improvement in their understanding career conversation aims and objectives, (b) by a 1.22 point improvement in their knowledge regarding potential challenges to implementing career conversations, (c) by a 1.43 point improvement in their knowledge about personal assets and the resources to access for engaging in career conversations, (d) by a 1.36 point improvement in their understanding how to conduct career conversations, and (e) by a 1.22 point improvement in being able to develop an action plan to address challenges in conducting effective career conversations.

The analyses of the six recorded career conversations indicated that they were using the career conversation format and skills taught during the training seminar and outlined in the *Orientation to Career Conversations: Manager Guide* (Lalande et al., 2009c). They also utilized some additional skills such as offering additional support to employees or being open to employees' suggestions.

Interviews with 5 managers conducted 3 months after each had conducted a career conversation resulted in feedback about what they liked (21 incidents/factors) and disliked (3 factors) about the seminar. They mentioned they liked the design of the seminar including length, materials, activities, and the style and skills used by the facilitator. They thought that the material was clearly presented and the information conveyed was useful. They liked the diversity of the participants in the group and the different perspectives and ideas that were shared. They also thought the group discussion was good for generating ideas, having interaction, and providing feedback to each other. The responses indicated that the seminar helped them review their personal assets and resources to conduct career conversations, and they were able to identify the assets explored during the training sessions.

A few suggestions for improving the seminar included that they would have liked more opportunity for discussion and also additional topics such as how to handle different topics that may arise during career conversations. Some thought that the design of the training seminar—such as the length of the breaks, the

way the examples were worded, and how activities were introduced— could be improved. The evaluation results indicate that the training seminar could have put more emphasis on how to overcome the challenges of implementing the career conversation intervention in the workplace. A review of possible strategies for garnering this support could have been helpful to include during the training seminar. However, not all of the manager training participants had the support of their organizations for implementing career conversations in the workplace prior to the training. Addressing this issue may not be as important if the managers who receive the training already have the support of their senior management.

Impact of Career Conversations on Employees

The 8 employees interviewed after participating in career conversations represented a variety of occupations and work sectors. Seventy-three helping critical incidents, 11 hindering critical incidents, and 13 wish list items were identified in the results (see Table 1). The number of comments in each category suggests that some incidents were more helpful for the employees. The following categories have the highest percentage of helpful incidents (63%): (a) initiating and assisting communication (category 1); (b) discussing work, goals, and future (category 2); (c) open and genuine interpersonal interaction (category 3); and (d) employers' qualities and approach (category 4). These categories highlight the importance of the communication skills utilized by the manager who conducts the career conversation, as well as the focus on topics related to the employee's work goals and future. The emphasis in the manager training seminar on communication skills training as well as the focus of career conversations is supported by this feedback.

Other helpful incidents included the value of having the manager self-disclose about personal career experiences and challenges (category 6). It was also reported that the encouragement received by employees to continue to develop and work toward career goals was helpful (category 8). The use of resources and tools during the conversation was also helpful (category 9). These were utilized for self-assessment, deepening their self-knowledge of skills, and providing ongoing resources for employees. In addition, employees indicated that it was helpful to have the conversations while at work and within the workplace (category 11). This increased accessibility and the likelihood that the conversations would take place, as well as being interpreted by employees that the company cared about them. Another helpful aspect of career conversations was that it provided employees an opportunity to talk about work challenges, stresses, and feelings related to difficulties at work.

The incidents that were not helpful were (a) distractions and restrictions (e.g., phone interruptions—category 7); (b) a lack of preparation for the conversation (category 5); and (c) problems with initiating and assisting communication (category 10). These unhelpful incidents emphasize the importance of managers using good communication skills and taking the time to prepare for each conversation.

Feedback from employees 6 months after the career conversation suggested that the perceived benefits of career conversations persisted, as did the identified processes that facilitated successful conversations. In particular, employees learned how to achieve career goals, and the conversations helped them consider these career goals. They felt more committed to the career goals, and the conversations were a beginning for personal development. It was important, however, that the manager who conducted the career conversation followed through with the stated intentions after the career conversation. If this did not happen, it could result in employee mistrust of the manager and the experience of not being supported.

After the first formal career conversations, employees reported that they were more likely to participate in brief, informal, ongoing communication rather than additional formal conversations. Having the possibility for advancement within the company and the perception that the company had an interest in their career development encouraged employees to participate in future conversations.

Impact of Career Conversations on Managers and Organizations

Six months after the initial career conversation, there was evidence to suggest that career conversations had positive impacts upon the managers. Managers reported wanting to continue career conversations and were interested in improving their conducting of conversations. They believed that career conversations had a positive influence on their roles as managers and improved their relationships with employees. They reported beneficial impacts upon employees' career development and workplace performance, such as making more of an effort in the workplace, taking a course, and following up with the manager's requests. Career conversations increased managers' awareness of any discrepancies between employee skill levels and the organization training program qualifications, resulting in seeking solutions for this issue.

Although the direct impact of career conversations on the businesses was not measured, the results indicate that the outcomes are likely to be very positive. The results suggest that career conversations have the potential to benefit businesses by (a) improving manager-employee relationships, (b) improving employee work performance, (c) aligning employee goals with organizational goals, and (d) providing more meaningful training programs. Employees reported increased ability to formulate career plans that aligned with the workplace needs. Supporting the employees' career management in a systematic way benefits organizations in achieving their business goals.

DISCUSSION

This was a pilot study that was aimed at introducing and evaluating the value of career conversations for SMEs based on challenges that these organizations often experience in the retention and development of employees. In discussing the results of the study, it is important to consider the challenges that were ex-

perienced in implementing it. The first and most obvious was the small sample size and the high dropout rate among managers. It is clear from their statements that they saw the benefit of initiating career conversations with employees and valued what they learned in the training seminar. Their challenge was in finding time and space to actually conduct the interviews within their place of work, which led to the high rate of attrition. It seems likely that the lack of time may have also made it difficult to recruit other managers to participate in the study. The other limitation had to do with limits of research time and resources that led to not transcribing the final interview with the managers. These factors represent limitations to the study, and any implications of the results of the study need to be understood within this context.

The study provided some evidence that sharing responsibility with employees for their career development through the use of career conversations between managers and employees is potentially beneficial for all parties. Although employees are generally expected to initiate their own career management, the results of this study supports literature that indicates it is in the organization's and managers' best interest to support their employees' career development (Gambill, 1979; Kidd, Hirsh, & Jackson, 2004). With more of the recent emphasis on managers to change their management style whereby employees are more involved in the decision-making process and business goal awareness (Ballout, 2007), the career conversation provides a means to achieve this approach. The results indicate that career conversations also may be useful for managers as a strategy to coach and motivate employees.

Career conversations represent an intervention that requires moderate resources for implementation in companies where human resources support is minimal. To implement career conversations in a business requires manager participation in a 12-hour training seminar. Both employers and employees need to spend preparation time to ready themselves for each conversation that can range from 15 to 60 minutes. The potential reported benefits are extensive, considering this limited investment of resources. However, it is clear that the manager requires formal organizational support for the implementation of career conversations with employees. This includes time for training, preparation, and conducting regular career conversations. It is also essential to have an evaluation process in place to monitor the impact of career conversations for all parties and adjust processes as indicated in the feedback provided by the participants.

For career development professionals, this research lends support for the value of career development programs for employees located within the workplace. Qualified career development professionals can provide the training for managers to conduct career conversations and provide ongoing support while the career conversations are underway. Because career conversations are exploratory and focused on initial career goal-setting and planning, it is expected that managers will need to refer some employees for career counselling. For example, career counselling may be indicated if an employee needs more in-depth assessment or experiences career indecision related to underlying issues such as low

self-esteem or lack of knowledge about career opportunities. Career conversations offer working adults access to career services that are in short supply for this population.

This evaluation research should be continued with a variety of different types of businesses to determine if these pilot study results will be replicated across different sectors, types of organizations, employees, and managers. In extending this research, it will be important that there is sufficient prior consultation with each organization regarding the time needed by managers and employees to engage in career conversations. It will also be important that the company commit to providing sufficient time for the conversations to be effectively utilized. On the basis of the current study, most of the challenges related to finding sufficient time were with the managers.

When an organization adopts the career conversation strategy within their business, they should be invited to participate in research to determine the impact on factors such as employee turnover, employee training, and profit/loss. As the numbers of businesses that utilize career conversations increases, it will be possible to determine the impact of this strategy on the organization relative to the resources required.

What set this career conversations training program apart from most other workplace training programs was the focus on the communication skills managers needed to effectively handle a career conversation, and the opportunity for managers to practice them in a safe setting. Although these skills (e.g., active listening, open questions, paraphrasing, primary empathy, clarifying questions, and summarizing) are foundational to the counselling field, they are not commonplace in business settings. It is therefore important for any future revisions to this program to ensure this element is maintained or enhanced. While we recognize the difficulties managers may experience in finding two days to attend a training program given their workloads, to eliminate this element would likely reduce the effectiveness of the intervention. The feedback received from managers clearly stated they needed more help around how to deal with unforeseen issues or lack of support for career conversations in their organizations, highlighting the need to focus on process and not just deliver content. The employees' experiences of the career conversations as positive were clearly linked to these communication skills used by their managers.

In conclusion, this pilot study provided support for the implementation of manager training for career conversations along with the resulting implementation of career conversations in SMEs. It has demonstrated a number of improvements in the managers' ability to communicate with and be supportive of employees. As indicated in the introduction, these outcomes are linked to healthy workplaces benefiting employees, organizations, and societies. It also facilitated the employees' career development, contributing to their motivation at work and aligning personal career goals and training with organizational needs. Given the limitations of the current study, further research and development is needed to assess the potential of this intervention for managers and employees in a variety of organizations.

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