

## Tales from the Field

### A Needs Assessment of ITSS, Inc. Career Development Opportunities

By Janice Aull, Jeff Bartley, Colleen Olson, and Lauren Weisberg

*Tales from the Field, a monthly column, consists of reports of evidence-based performance improvement practice and advice, presented by graduate students, alumni, and faculty of Boise State University's Organizational Performance and Workplace Learning department.*

#### The Client

ITSS, Inc. (a pseudonym) is a leading provider of IT solutions and services across North America. ITSS offers a career development program with a wide range of tools and resources that employees can leverage to drive their own career development. Direct managers aim to support their employees by setting clear expectations, providing ongoing feedback, helping identify development opportunities, and acting as coaches and/or mentors for the employees when needed. Tools and resources developed and offered by the organization are intended to support both managers and employees in identifying and developing employees' skills and career interests.

#### The Performance Issue

ITSS conducts an employee engagement survey bi-annually to assess employee engagement levels. Feedback generated from the past two cycles (2010 and 2012) returned mediocre ratings regarding employees' satisfaction levels with the organization's career development program. This highlighted a potential issue for ITSS, as they strive to do their part to ensure that employees are up-to-date with the skills needed for their current roles and prepare them for organizational and career growth. Furthermore, ITSS views highly skilled and engaged employees as a competitive advantage, providing the foundation for the organization's future success.

Results of these surveys suggested a potential gap between the organization's intentions and actions for supporting employees, and how employees perceive and use the resources provided to them. This introduces the potential for loss of opportunities for employees and, in turn, for the organization as it continues to grow and develop. Initially, ITSS's stakeholders were concerned that employees were not fully utilizing available career development resources. Data from the engagement surveys highlighted low utilization and an overall unawareness of the existing tools and resources supporting career growth. Specifically, this data reflected that approximately 20% of employees were engaged in using the career development resources, which was 40% below the organization's desired 60% participation level. Based on this, the client assumed that the problem was due to employees' lack of motivation and/or knowledge regarding how to access and use these resources. To further explore the issue and identify solutions to increase employees' perceptions of the career development program and in turn their utilization of it, the client engaged a team of graduate students from Boise State University. From the onset, the team recognized that a performance problem was not readily visible, as the issue highlighted a gap in desired employee behavior rather than a problem impacting organizational outcomes. Rather than jumping to solutions based on the stakeholders' assumptions, the team convinced the organization

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to move forward with a comprehensive needs assessment aimed at defining the actual performance problem(s) and/or opportunities that would effect improved performance, gathering and analyzing data to explore the causes of the performance and/or opportunities gap(s), and recommending one or more interventions that ITSS could implement to close the actual gaps and effect sustainable change.

### Conducting a Gap Analysis

To begin the process of clarifying the gap in terms of performance, the team sought answers to the first three of Harless' (1973) 13 Smart Questions to determine if there was a performance problem worth solving:

1. Do we have a problem?
2. Do we have a performance problem?
3. How will we know if the problem is solved?

To effectively respond to these three critical questions, the team collaborated with the client to develop a program logic model (see Figure 1). This model provided a high-level overview of ITSS's career development program by mapping the relationships between the program's various means (i.e., activities and inputs) and intended outcomes (i.e., outputs, short- and long-term outcomes, and impacts). The team then analyzed the model to better understand if and how the program's various means were aligned to achieve the intended outcomes. Initial analysis highlighted how ITSS's current career development tools, resources, and processes should be leveraged to support the ability of employees to take advantage of internal opportunities to move up in the organization and aid their own career progress as well as sustainably enhance the potential and capacity of the organization.

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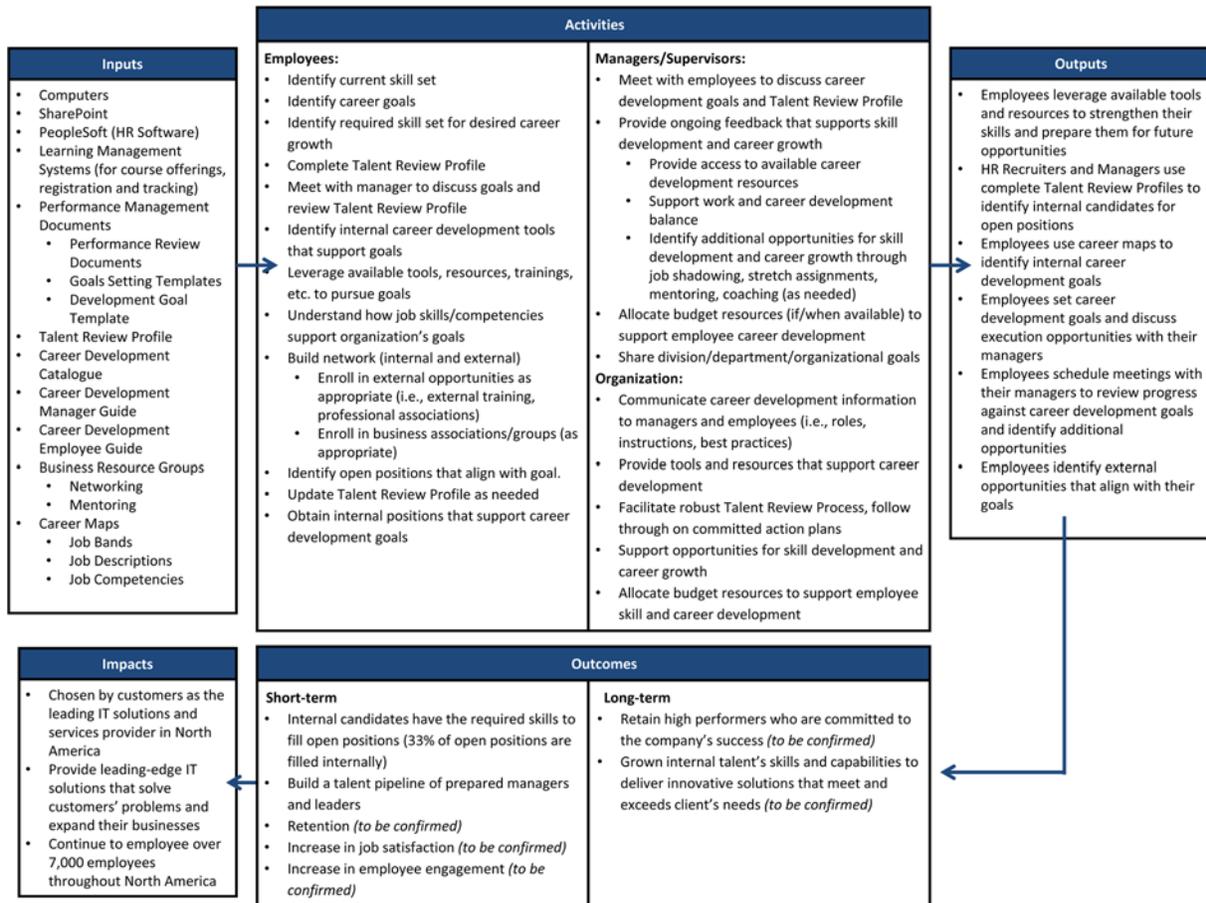


Figure 1. Career development program logic model.

The team then conducted additional internal and external document reviews to explore this issue (see Table 1). Specifically, the research highlighted that ITSS currently fills 33% of positions with internal candidates, which is 5% less than industry standards. The team determined that if they could increase this rate to 38%, it would add to significant financial savings. According to a recent study by Saratoga Institute (Schawbel, 2012), “the average cost of finding and hiring someone from outside the company is 1.7 times greater than an internal hire (\$8,676 vs. \$15,008)” (para. 4). The team determined the true gap was the 5% difference in current performance versus industry standards. As a result, the team began researching how both ITSS and its employees can close this gap. This led to development of another layer of research and analysis that made use of existing data, which was organized around the structure of Harless 13 smart questions (1973) and Gilbert’s Behavior Engineering Model (BEM) (1996).

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Table 1

### *Data Collection Tools and Techniques Used to Identify the Need*

Method	Source(s)
Internal Document Review/Audit	<p>ITSS company documents relevant to the assessment include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Employee Engagement Survey Results Summary</li> <li>2. Career Development Philosophy</li> <li>3. Career Development Process and Expectations</li> <li>4. Career Development Access to Tools and Resources</li> <li>5. Career Development Catalogue</li> <li>6. Learning and Development (L&amp;D) program information:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Statistics regarding number and type of eLearning courses taken</li> <li>b. Statistics from internal L&amp;D SharePoint site</li> </ol> </li> <li>7. Talent Review Profile completion</li> <li>8. Internal hiring metrics</li> </ol>
External Literature Review	<p>External documents and research relevant to the assessment include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Review of current trends in career development and internal mobility with a focus on how and to what degree it impacts performance: quality, productivity, or retention (Watkins et al., 2012).</li> <li>2. Corporate Leadership Council</li> </ol>

The team used these reviews to sequentially answer the first three of Harless' questions and define the performance gap (see Table 2).

Table 2

### *Data Collected to Define the Performance Gap*

Question	Response
1. Do we have a problem?	<p>Yes. The organization's internal data identified a gap between the current and desired percentages of employees leveraging career development initiatives to help position themselves for additional job opportunities at ITSS. Qualified internal candidates currently fill 33% of open positions, which is 5% below current industry standards.</p>

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2. Do we have a performance problem?	Yes. The external literature review indicated that organizational outputs and outcomes can be improved by addressing this issue. In particular, ITSS can deliver and receive tremendous business value by effectively implementing internal career development programs that help position employees for additional job opportunities within the company. This is not only a financial benefit, but is also linked to overall job satisfaction and retention.
3. How will we know if the problem is resolved?	When ITSS achieves a 5% increase in the number of positions filled by internal candidates.

The team reviewed and confirmed the performance gap with the client to include:

- Revise the ITSS organization’s career development tools, resources, and processes so that employees use it more frequently and those employees that use it are promoted internally at a rate of 38% after two years (a best-in-industry standard) (see Figure 2).

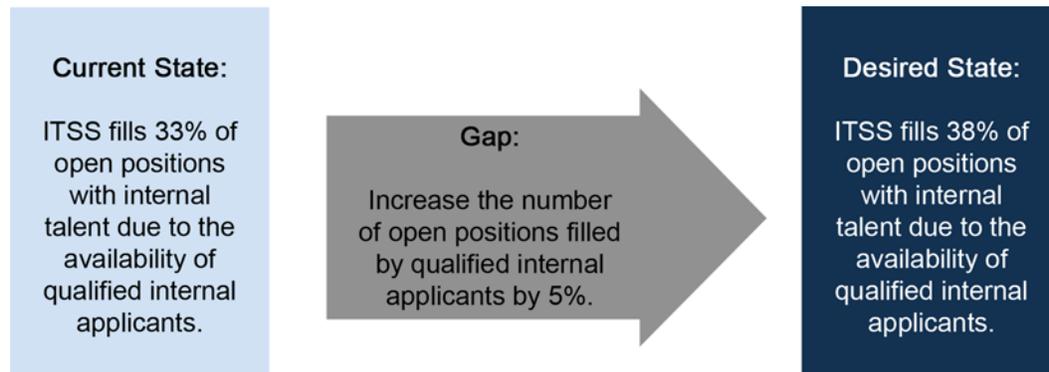


Figure 2. Career development performance gap.

## A Systemic Approach to Cause Analysis

With the performance gap established, the team sought to identify the causes by applying Chevalier’s (2003) updated version of Gilbert’s (1996) BEM as a framework to support a systematic process for data collection, analysis, and synthesis. Chevalier gives motives higher priority than did Gilbert in his original BEM, and the team believed this would aid in pursuing a hunch that motives played a relatively large role in the issues being studied, without otherwise skewing analysis.

This framework supported the team’s ability to adopt a systemic perspective and explore various factors that supported or hindered participation in personal career development such as environmental factors

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(data, resources, and incentives) and individual factors (knowledge, capacity, and motives). The framework guided data collection planning with questions for focus groups, individual interviews, and online surveys linked to the six BEM categories.

Data (DAT) 	Knowledge (KNL) 
Resources (RES) 	Capacity (CAP) 
Incentives (INC) 	Motivation (MOT) 

Each step in the data collection approach was conducted sequentially and was based on emerging themes from the previous stage, which supported triangulation of results. As Watkins and others (2012) describe, “deductive approaches begin with a framework or model, then they sort data into the prescribed structure” (p. 65). The team color-coded data based on the six BEM categories (see Figure 3), and tallied the codes in each category to identify trends that could be causing the gap.

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<p>1. Who is responsible for initiating the conversation? Employee or manager?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>DAT:</b> There are two types of conversations: one where the co-worker initiates the conversation to identify the next steps. <b>INC:</b> The other is identifying opportunities to close a skills or performance gap within the current role. This is initiated by the co-worker.</li> <li>• <b>INC:</b> Responsibility of coworker to bring it up if they want to progress</li> <li>• <b>INC:</b> Responsibility of manager to help with their current role, or <b>MOT</b> point out a skill that the employee may not recognize</li> <li>• There isn't one person who is responsible. <b>INC:</b> If the co-worker wants to make a move, they are responsible. But <b>DAT:</b> the manager should be open to discussing, "where do you see yourself?" Manager should ask twice a year: Where do you see yourself in a few months? A few years?</li> <li>• <b>DAT:</b> Joint effort between employee and manager.</li> <li>• Should lean towards leadership to have that conversation. If the employee says "I'm happy," that's fine. But <b>RES:</b> make sure employees are aware of the tools and <b>INC:</b> opportunities for where they want to go.</li> <li>• Sometimes, <b>INC:</b> being content in a position isn't quite enough, and managers need to identify this in an employee and be open to discussing this. Say as a manager, "Have you ever thought of...?" This opens the door, and employees may say "yes" or "no" or "why did you think of that."</li> <li>• <b>DAT:</b> Two way street. Not one person has the sole responsibility.</li> <li>• I assume <b>DAT:</b> the convo would happen naturally when discussing employee's goals, as opposed to the employee being passive and just sitting there not bouncing ideas off their managers</li> <li>• Doesn't necessarily have to be a scheduled session, like once a quarter, etc. <b>DAT:</b> As managers, we should just let them know that the door is open, and if something comes up in the meantime, the <b>INC:</b> employee can just naturally progress the relationship and go speak to them regarding career development.</li> </ul>
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Figure 3. Example of coding process performed on collected interview and focus group data.

Based on the codes identified in the previous step, the team conducted focus groups asking employees to weigh the impact of examples of each code on their decision to pursue development resources offered by the company. This produced a ranked weighting of each code, which allowed the team to rank the impact each category had on employees' likelihood to pursue company-sponsored career development opportunities.

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With this data, the team identified categories within the BEM that were potential causes of the gap, identifying the following sub-factors:

- Lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities
- Lack of marketing for available resources
- Lack of coaching and support to understand how to leverage tools
- Uncertainty in how to work towards other positions within organization due to lack of sufficient career mapping resources

To further understand these factors and sub-factors, the team conducted a survey with a subset of employees and managers. Survey questions were focused on these factors and sub-factors in the BEM framework. The results of the survey confirmed the following emerging trends:

- 41% of respondents either never meet with their managers or only meet with their managers once a year to discuss career development (DATA).
- While most respondents indicated that they do have career goals (88%), only 44% of respondents have documented that they use ITSS's available tools and resources (DATA).
- 58% of respondents indicated they believed the available tools and resources are not applicable to their career development (RESOURCES).
- 65% indicated that ITSS's career development program best supported skill development applicable to their current roles. Additionally, when asked to stack-rank the available tools and resources according to their perceived values, the tools that are designed to support navigation of career paths and opportunities (i.e., Career Framework and Clickable Career Map) scored among the lowest (RESOURCES and INCENTIVES)

Once the analysis and synthesis process was complete, four major trends emerged, all of which related to environmental factors within the BEM:

1. **Data:** Lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities
2. **Resources:** Lack of clarity about available tools and resources
3. **Resources:** Lack of coaching and support to understand how to leverage tools
4. **Incentives:** Uncertainty in how to work towards other positions within organization due to lack of sufficient career mapping resources

The team discovered that while employee motivation couldn't be discounted, it was not identified as an important influence on employees. Instead, it seemed that the organization could make a larger and more sustainable difference by addressing environmental factors.

## Intervention Selection

The team then transferred the potential root causes into a Multicriteria Analysis chart. Partnering with ITSS subject matter experts, the team took a step-by-step, quantitative analysis approach to review and assign a score to the potential root causes. This included assigning five criteria of equal weight to the analysis, using a rating scale of 1 (lowest priority) through 10 (highest priority). This supported the team's ability to identify potential improvement activities.

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The next step in the intervention selection focused on identifying organizational constraints, which included the need for continuous communication, marketing, and limited support resources for maintenance of the organization's career development tools and resources. With the constraints identified, the team prioritized the interventions and recommended the following set of interventions, in order of priority as we estimated their impact:

- Ensure job descriptions and career maps are current and easily accessible.
- Secure dedicated resources to support the career development program.
- Implement a long-term career development communication and maintenance strategy.
- Develop and maintain career development expectation training and/or job aids, and clarify the organization's career development philosophy, define career development expectations for managers and employees, and where and how to access related tools and resources.

## Summary of Recommendations

The team recognized a primary organizational constraint existed in that the organization currently offered limited dedicated resources to support and maintain an ongoing career development program. To address this constraint and support accomplishment of the long-term vision the organization desires, the team recommended that ITSS dedicate resources to implement these top-priority interventions, and then take future steps to address subsequent interventions in order of priority.

## Takeaway

This case study provides a concrete example of how a systematic needs assessment can make use of common tools, frameworks and processes in order to produce data-driven conclusions and advice to help an organization solve performance problems and meet its organizational goals.

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